

Contentious Politics and State Response:
How Policy Choices Shape Crisis Behavior

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Abstract

What explains the variations in the governments' conflict behavior during the 2011 Arab uprisings? Specifically, why do certain governments choose violent repression as a crisis strategy while others adopt both bargaining and a comparatively low level of repression in order to reach a political compromise when facing mobilized mass opposition? This research advances the proposition that a non-democratic government crisis response is a function of its consolidation (level of autocracy). The project explores the relationship between autocratic consolidation and the capacity of the incumbent regime to repress with impunity.

Highly autocratic governments are expected to repress dissent violently rather than engage in accommodative strategies, and therefore, they are more likely to either crush the uprisings or, should public protests persist despite the violent coercion, it would potentially escalate the conflict. The political costs of repression, then, place decisional opportunities –and constraints– onto policymakers. In addition, autocratic consolidation can induce or prevent a shift in the authoritative decision unit, which proved to be consequential to crisis' outcomes. While, domestic crises hardly stay domestic in this globalized world, international pressure hardly factors in a government's decision calculus at the outset of domestic unrest. Most importantly, autocracies are unlikely to prosecute a coherent crisis management strategy while maintaining a monopoly over the crisis decision making process at the highest authority levels and pursuing short term goals.

Dedication

To my parents, whose affection, encouragement and prayers helped me reach and complete this stage of my life.

And, to my wife Amna and daughters, Mouza, Latifa and Mariam who are the joy of my life.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This research focuses on state-policy crisis behavior and seeks to better understand why governments react differently to dissident collective action. Specifically, this research will look at how a domestic crisis that began as a non-violent civil protest, as was the case in Syria, transformed through a series of government policy decisions into a destructive civil war that now jeopardizes the political survival of the regime and the national survival of the state. Why did the Syrian regime adopt a strategy of repression as its solution to the crisis when these very same measures proved to be counterproductive and ultimately failed to save the regimes of both Tunis and Egypt? What explains the implementation of such self-defeating crisis management behavior? Are we witnessing the slow death of a state due to its miscalculated policy decisions? Or, were these decisions otherwise calculated and strategic with the clear purpose of the ruler's political survival in mind? If regime survival is the ultimate objective of autocratic states, one would expect that their crisis management responses would aim to minimize the risks of state failure or regime collapse. By contrast, why did the Egyptian government, when confronted with similar domestic crisis, ultimately reach a political compromise and accommodate the demands of the opposition thus giving their political opponents the upper hand?

This research seeks to investigate the diverse crisis decision-making processes in Egypt and Syria and the following research questions have inspired and will guide this inquiry: Why did these governments respond to the crises differently? Were the governments' responses based on a coherent strategy of crisis management or were they the result of improvised tactics and driven by

short-term goals? More fundamentally, why do autocratic regimes consolidate and how does the level of consolidation influence their repressive capacity? And, most crucially, how does this repressive capacity, in turn, enter into the ruling elites' calculus of crisis management strategies and decision-making?

Forces of globalization, communication technologies and increased political awakening have made internal wars and democratization struggles the most prevalent conflicts of the 21st Century. In recent years, contentious political challenges in the form of mass protests, demonstrations and uprisings have come to dominate news headlines and to alarm governments, even those with seemingly the tightest security grip. These domestic conflicts continue to bring states into confrontation with domestic actors over primarily political issues, and have become the major threats to the stability and security of many nondemocratic states, and by extension, to international security. The 2011 Arab uprisings have ushered a new paradigm in the region's political development and have intensified domestic conflicts in many states. Understanding the underlying causes of crisis decision making that could lead to the onset of protracted and violent domestic conflicts is the subject of this academic inquiry.

1. Significance of the Research

Civil uprisings in non-democratic states are serious crises that involve high stakes and choices whose outcome may trigger significant political restructuring and profoundly affect a state's stability or survival if they escalate into an intractable civil conflict. In fact, destabilizing mass protests constitute national security threats whose escalation since 2011 have raised the specter of state collapse in Yemen, the threat of state breakup in Libya and Syria, the upsurge of

political violence and instability in Egypt, and, the continued faceoff in Bahrain, Jordan and elsewhere that pits governments, as they muddle through the ensuing regional turmoil, against their populations who demand bottom-up changes. These internal conflicts threaten to merge into one destructive sectarian war that would devastate the Middle East, unravel the century-old Sykes-Picot political order and potentially redraw national borders. These growing threats that jeopardize national security of individual states in the region, if not defeated or contained, will ultimately threaten international security.

Hence, the question of how governments can address these security vulnerabilities has become the subject of intense scholarly and policy debate. In addition, studying these crises represent an opportunity for theorizing since they place institutions and policies to the test, bring up issues of accountability and government failure, shore up latent political and social forces of change to the fore and, create an opening to review, redesign and rebuild failing policies and standard procedures. Therefore, understanding the underlying causes of state crisis decision making is a significant issue worthy of scientific research that may illuminate various aspects of the changes occurring in the region as well as help produce policy prescriptions on how states can best manage waves of revolutionary upheavals and domino-like unrest with the least political costs and prevent destabilizing consequences.

2. Organization of the Dissertation

This research is divided into seven chapters. After this introductory chapter, definitions and brief theoretical background on the research concepts are presented in chapter 2. This is followed by the research main argument and the hypotheses that predict the causal relationship.

The chapter ends with an overview of the theories and findings on the topic in the literature. The methodology and research design are covered in chapter 3, while the analysis of the rival explanations is the focus of Chapter 4. Chapters 5 -14 delve into the in-depth case studies of the crises in Egypt and Syria, respectively. Finally, Chapter 15 summarizes the findings of this research and their policy implications and discusses the research contributions to the literature, its limitations and how it could be extended and improved in the future.

Chapter 2

Background and Theory

1. Theoretical Frameworks

This research focuses on the nexus of consolidation of non-democratic regimes, state repression and policy crisis response on the onset of mass domestic unrest. It advances the proposition, and seeks to test its empirical causal link, that higher regime consolidation decreases the political costs of state-sponsored repression, which in turn, enters the political leadership's strategic calculus of crisis management when facing contentious collective action. It is important then to define the research theoretical concepts at its outset to narrow the field of inquiry and specify its objects of study before presenting the main argument.

1.1 Contentious Politics

Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly define contentious politics broadly as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or party to the claims and (b) the claims, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants...Roughly translated, the definition refers to a collective political struggle.”¹ Contentious politics takes various forms, the most common feature of which is collective action. These contentious collective actions (CCA) include protests, demonstrations, strikes, uprisings and even revolutions. These events may begin as non-violent mass mobilization

¹ Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly ‘Contentious Politics and Social Movements’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, eds. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009): p. 438

between a government and portions of the population and could morph into a violent challenge that gradually escalates into an open civil war.² Tilly and Tarrow state that contentious politics “brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics.”³

This research will focus on one particular form of CCA; namely, civil uprisings, defined as large-scale, sustained and cross-class civil mobilization against a government for primarily political issues. Civil uprisings, as contentious collective actions, aim “directly or indirectly to transform existing patterns of political authority. By their very nature, these sorts of disruptive acts pose a challenge to autocratic regimes.”⁴ Based on the intensity of contention, contentious politics resides in the middle ground between normal politics, i.e.; institutional politics (e.g. voting, campaigning) and open conflict (civil war).

1.2 Crisis Decision Making

Non-democratic regimes often lack the institutions of free press, fair elections and judicial independence, among others, which can help governments channel crises and cope with uprisings and mass politics. Crisis is defined as “a serious threat to the basic structure or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decision”.⁵ Uprisings, as forms of contentious collective action, are acute, unexpected and are often unprecedented political events that constitute periods of

² Contentious politics comprises both non-violent and violent collective actions below the civil war threshold. Contentious politics, by definition, represents claims by collective actors who challenge the authority within a state. This entails that sovereignty in the state remains intact and its authority, to a large extent, still monopolizes violence.

³ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007): p.4

⁴ Jay Ulfelder ‘Contentious Collective Action and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes’ *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 311-334 (July 2005): p. 312

⁵ Uriel Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles and Paul ‘t Hart, eds. *Coping with crises: The Management of Disasters, riots and terrorism* (Springfield. IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1989) : p.10

discontinuity from normalcy and hence demand non-routine decision-making. These high impact events threaten 'core' state interests, impose intense stress on decision makers, demand urgency for response, test the limits of a states' capacities, and may involve high uncertainty and heightened risk of armed conflict. Crises constitute complex situations that require decisive actions by the highest level of decision-making authorities in order to secure certain government objectives. As such, the 2011 Arab mass uprisings fit this crisis definition and this research will employ a crisis analysis methodology to test its hypotheses. This methodology involves understanding the context of the crisis, establishing a crisis timeframe, breaking up the crisis into distinct decision-making units and then investigating each unit in great depth.

Policy crises are complex events that comprise multiple actors and produce complex crisis behavior and outcomes. The secrecy surrounding decision making by the political leadership in closed regimes has often posed an obstacle to researchers in terms of access to documentary evidence. However, recent revelations through accounts of former officials, regime defectors, area experts and, at the minimum, the ability to infer regime crisis decisions from a regime's actual response may all help illuminate how the crisis decision making took place, who were the relevant decision makers and what shaped their eventual policy choices and, more crucially, how the cascade of decisions, in the case of Egypt led to the ouster of Mubarak from power and, in the Syria case, how the popular contention-state repression dynamics led to the escalation of the crisis into a full blown civil war.

1.3 Autocratic Consolidation

The concept of regime consolidation has been widely employed in the study of democracies, i.e., how democracies become stable, secure and immune to relapsing into authoritarianism.⁶ Larry Diamond argued “the essence of democratic consolidation is a behavioral and attitudinal embrace of democratic principles and methods by both elites and mass.”⁷ A democracy is deemed as consolidated when its democratic principles, political culture and institutions have deepened and stabilized and where its political actors have accepted democracy as the "only game in town".⁸ Such a democracy will most likely overcome various threats and crises such as mass protests, attempted coups, very close elections and severe economic decline,⁹ and hence chances of democratic breakdown or reverting to authoritarianism are minimal.¹⁰ Despite the extensive scholarly research on non-democratic regimes, employing the concept of consolidation on autocracy and investigating its influence on a government's domestic policy or crisis behavior remains largely unexplored, and this research aims to fill this gap.¹¹ In addition, the dominant paradigm in comparative autocracy is regime type (military, single party, personalistic,

⁶ See for example: Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press: 1996); Larry Diamond and Doh Chull Shin, *Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation in Korea* (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press: 1999); Müge Aknur, ed. *Democratic Consolidation in Turkey* (Boca Raton, FL, Universal Publishers: 2012)

⁷ Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): p.20

⁸ Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan 'Toward Consolidated Democracies' *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 7. No. 2 (April 1996): p.15

⁹ Lowell Barrington, *Comparative Politics: Structures and Choices*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013): p.324

¹⁰ Most scholars differ on what constitutes the democratic 'threshold' that makes democracies be firmly established. Most of this disagreement trace back to different conceptions of democracy. Overall, this debate has enriched the democratization literature of the past 30 years.

¹¹ An autocratic regime is defined as a political system in which power and authority reside in the hands of a small group, where formal institutions that can hold politicians accountable for their actions are minimal or absent and where obedience, coercion and control of freedoms define the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. The terms dictatorships, autocracies, non-democracies and authoritarian regimes will be used interchangeably for style.

etc.). The concept of consolidation opens the door for a new paradigm in this discipline by classifying regimes, instead of regime type, according to their level of autocracy.

How dictatorships consolidate and increase their probability of staying in power remains, to some extent, opaque, and this research aims to illuminate the process. Regime consolidation can be described as “a deliberate state project to improve a regime’s capabilities for governing society...the durability of an authoritarian regime increases to the extent that regime elites manage to substitute coercion for governing by organization, regulation and the management of discourses”.¹² Essentially, the concept denotes regime movement towards a higher stage of authoritarianism, which may culminate the process of consolidation; i.e., reaching the stage of being robust, persistent and, ostensibly, crisis-proof.¹³ Consolidation increases regime dominance and control of the state and its citizens, and as regimes consolidate they reduce the probability of autocratic breakdown to the point where incumbent elites are sufficiently confident of their regime’s political endurance. The desire to secure political survival motivates consolidation.

If the term “consolidated democracy” means that democracy will likely overcome and survive crises, consolidated autocracy refers to the same notion, put simply; that it is likely to nip challenges in the bud, and should the crisis persist – such as during civil uprising demanding reforms – it will likely resist policy reforms given its capacity to defeat domestic threats. This proposition is plausible since highly autocratic regimes have a higher degree of penetration into society, their state institutions are committed to regime survival and they enjoy considerable support among the elites and portions of the public. As a result, these regimes are more willing to

¹² Christian Göbel ‘Authoritarian Consolidation’ *European Political Science*, No. 10 (2011): p.176

¹³ See discussion on the different concepts of consolidation: Andreas Schedler ‘Measuring Democratic Consolidation’ *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 66-92 (Spring 2001); Andreas Schedler ‘Concepts of Democratic Consolidation’ *Latin American Studies Association (LASA)* 17-19 April 1997 Guadalajara, Mexico Meeting Paper. Available from: <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LASA97/schedler.pdf>

escalate to higher levels of repression against dissent or social mobilization before domestic support begins to erode. Highly consolidated regimes such as Stalinist Russia and Maoist China committed atrocities against millions of their own citizens, yet they were able to survive.

Consolidation is a continuously evolving process in that regimes consolidate whenever conditions are opportune and, they are forced to *deconsolidate* or decrease their level of autocracy – by initiating democratic opening – if they confront overwhelming and inhibiting factors. For example, the 1976 Argentine coup brought to power a military dictatorship that may have been highly authoritarian at the zenith of its power in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, severe economic crises, growing civil opposition to the regime's infamous "Dirty War" and the ignominious defeat in the Falklands War severely eroded the regime's hold on power, discredited its legitimizing narrative and led to a dramatic loss of support within its own political coalition, hence decreasing its level of authoritarianism. It is perhaps no wonder why the Argentinian Military Junta, having lost much of its consolidation, had to acquiesce to free elections and transition to democratic rule under public pressure.

In dealing with the concept of regime consolidation, it is important at the outset to avoid the pitfalls of earlier works. For example, one major work defines democracy as consolidated when "democracy...has become, in a phrase, "the only game in town"¹⁴ and another "if the set of institutions that characterize it endure through time."¹⁵ While the former framework is difficult to

¹⁴ Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan 'Toward Consolidated Democracies' *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 7. No. 2, pp. 14-33 (April 1996): p.15

¹⁵ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): p.30

operationalize, the latter and many other works seem to confuse institutional stability with time, when in fact time can neither be an explanatory variable nor constitute a causal factor.¹⁶

The major consolidation objective of dictatorships, as most scholars agree, is "the accumulation of power and the perpetuation in power".¹⁷ Consolidation occurs through two dimensions: institutional and discursive powers.¹⁸ Institutional power refers to the capacity of a regime to dominate, monopolize and exploit state organs, institutions and resources and harness them to achieve the regime's political objectives. Said differently, consolidation represents the extent to which the state has become beholden to the regime. Increasing institutional power increases the regime's dominance as political actor.

As Max Weber noted, state power needs to justify itself.¹⁹ Regimes claim legitimacy by seeking the acceptance of society of their right to rule. Legitimacy is achieved through a host of means either on the basis of electoral victory in often semi or non-competitive elections, which constitute lesser credible claim, or directly from ideological legitimation derived from populist, nationalist or revolutionary ideology that invokes national interests or patriotic fervor.²⁰ A powerful ideology provides a compelling narrative as to why a regime and its political leadership should be revered, obeyed and allowed to continue to rule supreme.

¹⁶ For more, refer to Anna Grzymala-Busse 'Time Will Tell? Temporality and the Analysis of Causal Mechanisms and Processes' *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 9, pp. 1267-1297 (September 2011)

¹⁷ Andreas Schedler, *The New Institutionalism in the Study of Authoritarian Regimes*, APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper, p.3. Available from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1451602>

¹⁸ This framework borrows from Christian Göbel's measurement of authoritarian consolidation. Göbel employs the terms infrastructure, despotic and discursive powers. This research will use institutional and discursive powers only and leave out despotic power since the latter has an aspect of state repression. This approach allows the author to measure the impact of consolidation on state repression.

Christian Göbel 'Authoritarian Consolidation' *European Political Science*, No. 10 (2011)

¹⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): p. 953

²⁰ Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): p. 134-144

The ability of autocracies to influence public opinion is called discursive power, and this refers to the "means of securing the active complicity of the subjects of power in their own self-regulation."²¹ By dominating the national discourse through ideological narrative, regimes rationalize their actions, encourage political loyalty to state leadership, and construct consent around the concept of common goals, sense of collective purpose and opposition to common threats.²² Ideologies such as Communism, Nazism, xenophobic ethnic nationalism, often paint things in black and white and thus providing a very specific lens through which people understand and interpret the world around them. Thus, when a people deeply identify with an ideology, it can inspire and motivate actions.²³

It is no wonder why most autocratic regimes go to great lengths to deny their populace access to foreign media and information. Discursive power attempts to win the 'hearts and minds' of the populace by building an ideological consensus towards authoritarian support. An ideology, propagated through state-sponsored education, media and cultural practices plays a powerful role in socializing the populace – or many thereof – into political clientelism, quietude and acquiescence to state coercive practices. Of course, the effects of discursive power span a wide range of behaviors, varying from population acquiescence or tacit acceptance to active participation in a regime's validation of its narrative and popularity. Regimes that engage in political indoctrination, Orwellian public discourse, and personality cult rituals and which have developed a state's ideology, enjoy high discursive power. Consolidation occurs when regimes

²¹ Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic Relational Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008): p.147

Quoted in Christian Göbel 'Authoritarian Consolidation' *European Political Science*, No. 10 (2011): p. 186

²² A similar process, but to a lesser extent, occurs in democratic capitalist societies. As Antonio Gramsci remarked, ruling elites dominate societies through cultural hegemony; i.e., the manipulation of values, explanations and perceptions to justify the social, political and economic status quo and hence obtain the consent of the ruled. See for example, Perry Anderson 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' *New Left Review*, No. 100, pp. 7-78 (1976); Peter Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto press, 2004)

²³ See for example: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1974)

have high levels of institutional and discursive powers. The argument advanced in this research is that regimes with different levels of authoritarianism exhibit different crisis policy behavior and different propensities – i.e., capacity and desire – to repress or concede on the onset of popular rebellions.

The concept of regime consolidation builds on the literature of new institutionalism in political science, whose core argument posits that institutions – such as informal rules, constitutions, state organizations, etc. – shape social outcomes by structuring interests and incentives, altering the costs-benefits of courses of actions, constraining or facilitating patterns of interaction, and by constituting as actors in and of themselves.²⁴ As such, institutions established by autocrats determine their capacity to respond to crises by shaping their policy choices.²⁵ They are also the instruments through which they repress or co-opt their opponents.²⁶ Schedler argues that “even if institutions make autocracy work and augment the authoritarian ruler’s *probability* of surviving in office and governing effectively, they still contain the *possibility* of eroding authoritarian stability and governance.”²⁷

²⁴ See for example: Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds. *Bringing the state back in*. (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Elisabeth S. Clemens and James M. Cook ‘Politics and institutionalism: Explaining durability and change’ *Annual review of sociology*, pp. 441-466 (1999); Richard Snyder and James Mahoney ‘The missing variable: institutions and the study of regime change’ *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 103-122 (October 1999); Robert Barros ‘Personalization and institutional constraints: Pinochet, the military junta, and the 1980 constitution’ *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 43, Issue 1, pp. 5-28 (April 2001); Thomas Pepinsky ‘The institutional turn in comparative authoritarianism’ *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44, Issue 03, pp. 631-653 (July 2014).

²⁵ The ongoing debate whether or not institutions are exogenous constraints to individual behavior or endogenous to the interests of individuals who have created them continues to enrich the scholarly literature in comparative politics. See for example, William H. Riker ‘Implications from the disequilibrium of majority rule for the study of institutions’ *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 74, pp. 432-447 (1980); Kenneth A. Shepsle ‘Institutional equilibrium and equilibrium institutions’ In Herbert F. Weisberg, ed., *Political science: The science of politics*, pp. 51-82 (New York: Agathon, 1986); Kenneth A. Shepsle ‘Old questions and new answers about institutions: the Riker objection revisited’ *The Oxford handbook of political economy*, pp. 1031-1050 (2006)

²⁶ Beatriz Magaloni ‘Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule’ *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 715-741 (January 2008): 715–741

²⁷ Andreas Schedler ‘The new institutionalism in the study of authoritarian regimes’ p. 337 (emphasis in original)

1.4 State Repression

Governments repress to maintain stability, domestic order and political power. Scholarly research has found evidence for a positive relationship between the level of repression and the rate of survival in autocracies; i.e.; the more repressive the regime, the lower the risk of its overthrow.²⁸ Repression is defined as a government's use of violent and non-violent coercion in order to deter, contain or neutralize threats of political challenges. Violent coercion refers to acts in which physical harm, such as imprisonment, torture and murder, is inflicted on individual dissenters. This coercion is characterized as targeted violence against specific individuals or groups whose identities are known and the goal is to physically eliminate current dissenters and intimidate and deter potential participants in dissent.

Non-violent coercion refers to restrictions on civil rights such as banning political parties and limiting freedom of assembly and expression. This broad approach to repression is employed when the identity of the opposition is less known and hence the target is the whole population and it is aimed at hindering coordination for collective action among citizens.²⁹ Regimes employ repression and political terror to deter non-institutional challenges threatening a regime's political survival (protests, uprisings, revolutions...etc.) and seeks to contain or crush them when they occur.³⁰ Of course, autocrats do not rely on repression alone for accumulating power and ensuring survival. Their toolkit includes co-optation through patronage or establishing institutions such as

²⁸ Abel Escriba-Folch 'Repression, political threats, and survival under autocracy' *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 34, No. 5, pp. 543-560 (July 2013). However, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith found no relationship between repression and survival of autocracies; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith 'Leader survival, revolutions, and the nature of government finance' *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 936-950 (October 2010)

²⁹ See for example: Charles Tilly 'Violent and non-violent trajectories in contentious politics' in *Violence and Politics: Globalization's Paradox*, Worcester et al, eds., pp. 2-31 (New York: Routledge, 2002)

³⁰ Political terror refers to state-led violations of physical and personal integrity rights. I use state repression, state violence and political terror interchangeably

political parties and legislatures that help incorporate the opposition into the regime through the exchange of government benefits and policy concessions for loyalty. This is aimed at enlarging the segment of society whose vested interest lies in the continuation of the regime's tenure.³¹

Governments employ repression when they expect that the benefits exceed the costs.³² Certain levels of repression may deter contentious collective action or demobilize dissent if it occurs.³³ However, when repression exceeds a certain threshold, it may incite resentment among the populace, decrease the political legitimacy of the ruling regime, radicalize the opposition, provoke further protests and anti-state unrest and hence increase the risks of dictators' losing office.³⁴ This tipping point, beyond which repression motivates popular collective action rather than suppresses it, has been a major subject of theorizing in the repression literature.³⁵

³¹ Barbara Geddes 'Why parties and elections in authoritarian regimes?' *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC*. 2005; Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski 'Cooperation, cooptation, and rebellion under dictatorships' *Economics & Politics*, Vol. 18, No.1, pp. 1-26 (March 2006); Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Beatriz Magaloni 'Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule' *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 715-741 (January 2008)

³² Christian Davenport 'State repression and political order' *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 10, pp. 1-23 (June 2007)

³³ See for example: Dipak K. Gupta, Harinder Singh and Tom Sprague 'Government Coercion of Dissidents Deterrence or Provocation?' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 37, No.2, pp. 301-339 (June 1993); Jason Lyall 'Does indiscriminate violence incite insurgent attacks? Evidence from Chechnya' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 331-362 (June 2009).

³⁴ See for example: Karl-Dieter Opp. and Wolfgang Roehl 'Repression, micromobilization and political protest' *Social Forces*, Vol. 69, Issue 2, pp. 521-547 (December 1990); David G. Ortiz 'Confronting oppression with violence: Inequality, military infrastructure and dissident repression' *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 219-238 (September 2007); Jan Henryk Pierskalla 'Protest, deterrence, and escalation: The strategic calculus of government repression' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 117-145 (February 2010)

³⁵ Early and current literature on state repression suggests an implicit point of proportionality where further state repression begins to provoke public dissent rather than suppress it. However, the literature provides various models that depict different relationships between state repression and public dissent. See for example, Mark Irving Lichback 'Deterrence or Escalation? The Puzzle of Aggregate Studies of Repression and Dissent' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 266-297 (June 1987); James Davies 'The J-Curve of Rising and Declining Satisfactions as Cause of Some Great Revolutions and a Contained Rebellion' in *Violence in America*, H.D. Graham and Ted Gurr, eds., pp. 690-730 (New York: Praeger, 1969); Ivo K. Feierabend and Rosaline L. Feierabend 'Aggressive Behaviors Within Polities, 1948-1960: A Cross-national Study' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 10, pp. 249-271 (1962); Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); M. Khawaja 'Repression and Popular Collective Action: Evidence from the West Bank' *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 8, No.1, pp. 47-71 (1993); Mark

For example, in *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, Wintrobe argues that autocrats use repression and the accumulation of loyalty – through the distribution of political rents – as strategies to stay in power.³⁶ He conceives of four types of dictatorships; totalitarianism, tinpots, tyranny and timocracy, which are distinguished by the mix of the level of *repression* they employ and the *supply of loyalty* they maintain in their quest to maximize *income* and *power*. The author argues that since both repression and loyalty use up resources and that the level of the former affects the supply of the latter,³⁷ in “a totalitarian regime, repression is carried to the point at which at the margin, an increase in repression reduces the supply of loyalty”, which he describes as equilibrium political repression.³⁸ Essentially, the use of repression to maximize power leads to a diminishing returns in the supply of loyalty.

While Wintrobe makes a compelling argument using microeconomics and public choice analysis rather than rational choice theory embraced by most theorists today, his approach is not without criticism. First, one cannot reduce loyalty to the measure of how rents are distributed,³⁹ since there are various factors that influence the calculus of political allegiance. Second, loss of political loyalty does not necessarily translate into direct threats against the regime as coercive measures in place may continue to deter collective action. However, building on Wintorbe’s general theoretical model, it is plausible to propose the following fundamental assumptions:

Irving Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); W.H. Moore ‘Repression and Dissent: Substitution, Context and Timing’ *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 851-873 (July 1998); Christian Davenport, *State Repression and Domestic Democratic Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

³⁶ Roland Wintrobe, *The political economy of dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): p. 33

³⁷ Ibid, p.46

³⁸ Ibid, p.62

³⁹ Francis Fukuyama, book review ‘The Political Economy of Dictatorship by Ronald Wintrobe’ *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 5 (Sept. – Oct., 1998): p.147

1. Autocracies seek to *maximize* state repression to raise the costs of future dissident collective action as a deterrent effect. In fact, citizens in highly autocratic states realize their governments' extreme commitment to autocratic survival and they are less likely to participate in dissenting collective action.
2. Regimes seek to keep maximum repression *below* the level that might trigger popular backlash and galvanize social dissent. This is the optimal level of repression, which allows governments to make credible threats against potential dissenters and hence deter revolutions, but it also enables the use of high repression to crush uprisings when deterrence fails.
3. This optimal level constitutes the tipping point of political costs due to state repression. Said differently, a government has the capacity to afford the political costs incurred (such as public resentment, domestic criticism, loss of revenue from civil unrest, international condemnations or sanctions...etc.) when applying the optimal repression. Just like politicians in democratic regimes who seek to maximize their chances for re-elections by avoiding costly politics – as in dangerous gambles – autocratic leaders also aim to reduce the likelihood of rebellions and coups by keeping repression *just below its counterproductive threshold*. Therefore, maintaining the political costs of state political terror just below the tipping point, by repressing at the optimum level, is a critical course of action aimed at revolution-proofing, and thus maximizing a regime's potentials for political survival.
4. How can governments have the capacity to afford the political costs of state political terror? The use of repression at a certain level over an extended period tends to socialize or habituate the populace with state repressive practices and normalize the use of such coercive measures. Autocracies that dominate the public discourse are more capable of controlling the values, mores and expectations by which their citizens judge their actions. If a government has a record

of unleashing political terror against challengers in past crises, then citizens of such a government anticipate it to be *consistent* and *equally repressive* in future challenges. Previous policies, political claims, media discourse, government actions, legitimating rhetoric and how the government framed its repressive response – often against outgroups – as well as how it accounted for this level of violence (often invoking political, national or legal justifications) reinforce this belief of the people. State repression becomes consistent with pre-existing hegemonic normative order.⁴⁰

5. How can political costs of state repression be measured? Said differently, what level of state violence can the government apply and escape existential popular revolt? Put crudely, what is the scale of mass repression can a state ‘get away with’? As the above point explained, governments are likely to survive punishment if their level of repression remains consistent; i.e., if their current or future repressive policy is proportionate with its past actions and claims. This is not only a plausible proposition, but also comports with empirical evidence advanced by many scholars on the topic. For example, Moore argues that a state’s response to dissident protest “depends on the interaction of the state’s most recent behavior”.⁴¹ He also based his model on the assumption that the population is aware of the level of state repressive behavior and acts accordingly. Other scholars found “that citizens in countries with higher levels of repression also had more negative assessments of human rights”;⁴² i.e., citizens’ perceptions of their state’s level of violence correspond with the actual state violent practices. This research

⁴⁰ Suzanne E. Fry ‘When States Kill their Own: The Legitimizing Rhetoric and Institutional Remedies of Authority Crises’ *Dissertation*, Order No. 3157826 New York University, 2005. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 28 July 2014.

⁴¹ Will H. Moore ‘The Repression of Dissent A Substitution Model of Government Coercion’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 107-127 (February 2000)

⁴² Christopher J. Anderson, Patrick M. Regan and Robert L. Ostergard ‘Political Repression and Public Perceptions of Human Rights’ *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 439-456 (June 2002): p. 447

advances the proposition that the level of state political terror is primarily a function of its level of autocracy.

State repression is not only a function of domestic politics, but also of the international political system. With very few recent exceptions, dictators continue to repress with impunity given the lack of both political will among world powers and the weak enforcement mechanism in international law to reach deep into states and punish leaders for atrocities committed domestically. Despite the developments in international law and the proliferation of human rights organizations, many autocrats continue to crackdown on dissent, violate human rights treaties and commit international crimes in many parts of the world for *raison d'état*. Examples include Iran, Iraq, Sudan, South Sudan, Egypt, Russia, Burma and North Korea, to mention just a few.

By and large, our state-centric international system places state survival as a higher objective than the promotion of human security. The prospects and perceptions among leaders that they would escape both domestic as well as international punishment is a powerful motivation to repress in their quest to secure political survival. In fact, when the uprising in Syria erupted, perhaps few people thought that Bashar Al Assad could survive murdering 30,000 of his people, as his father did three decades previously, considering the dramatic evolution of international norms that evolved since then.⁴³ However, due to the Russian and Chinese veto power coupled with the Obama Administration's reluctance to use force in its retrenchment and global retreat,⁴⁴ the international community is unlikely to refer Assad to the International Criminal Court,⁴⁵ leaving him to enjoy immunity from domestic prosecution as the head of state if he survives the

⁴³ Suzanne Nossel 'The Age of Imperviousness: A dangerous new crop of dictators is learning that they really can get away with murder' *Foreign Policy*, 19 May 2014.

⁴⁴ Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday, 2013)

⁴⁵ Syria is not a party to the Rome Statute and therefore it can only be referred to the International Criminal Court by the Security Council

civil war. In short, while the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention in international law have suffered erosion in the last two decades,⁴⁶ the bar is still set high for intervention; i.e., autocrats still have wide margin to commit violent repression against their citizens before a large scale humanitarian crisis could compel world powers to put power politics aside and agree to turn the machinery of international justice.⁴⁷

2. Main Argument

The main proposition advanced in this research is that consolidation is a structural factor that shapes state crisis response strategy long before any given crisis occurs. At its most basic, this concept assumes that governments act strategically at the onset of anti-regime social mobilization. Therefore, autocratic leaders are not irrational decision makers as some might suggest; rather, they carefully assess threats to their power and cautiously calculate – and at times miscalculate due to misperceptions and lack of information among many other reasons – the adequate policy response to maintain their power and to secure their regime survival. At the tactical level, leaders also modify their policy at different stages during the crisis based on the action-reaction sequence with protesters.

Most scholars have made the argument that two major factors motivate politics in authoritarian regimes.⁴⁸ First, fear of regime overthrow by coups or revolutions. While coup-

⁴⁶ See for example: Jarat Chopra and Thomas G. Weiss 'Sovereignty is no longer sacrosanct: codifying humanitarian intervention' *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 6, pp. 95-117 (March 1992); Mohammed Ayoob 'Humanitarian intervention and state sovereignty' *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 81-102 (Spring 2002); Jutta Brunnée and Stephen Toope 'Norms, institutions and UN reform: The responsibility to protect' *Journal of International Law & International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 121-137 (2006)

⁴⁷ David Bosco, *Rough Justice: The International Criminal Court in a World of Power Politics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014)

⁴⁸ See for example: Timur Kuran 'Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989' *World Politics*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, pp. 7-48 (October 1991); Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of*

proofing measures can handle the former, the latter is largely driven by the dictator's dilemma, i.e.; the inability of regime elites to verify how genuinely people support their political system, which leaves them paranoid and insecure of potential vertical sources of removal from power. Second, violence is often the most swift and decisive means of settling conflicts and managing crises. Broadly speaking, a brutal crackdown is often the most common and successful policy to deal with oppositional mobilization or political revolts.

Compounding these two factors are the problems of making 'credible commitments'⁴⁹ as well as the lack of mechanisms that would ensure the enforcement of agreements among political actors in an authoritarian polity. Put bluntly, nothing can guarantee that people will not revolt in the future or that the regime elites will keep their promises or live up to their obligations. Within an environment lacking mutual trust, any commitments made between regime elites and citizens will be most likely deemed as not credible. Milan Svobik argues "authoritarian politics takes place in the shadow of betrayal and violence."⁵⁰

Given the above conditions, and by assuming that both governments and dissenting citizens are unitary coalitions, rational and self-interested actors, autocratic governments will necessarily seek to maximize political survival through consolidation; i.e., by securing higher levels of control and ownership of state institutions, resources and national narratives. Higher consolidation, by definition, increases political loyalty to the regime and raises the costs of dissent,

Dictatorship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Milan Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Natasha Ezrow and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders* (New York: Continuum books, 2011)

⁴⁹ Douglass C. North and Barry R. Weingast 'Constitutions and commitment: the evolution of institutions governing public choice in seventeenth-century England' *The journal of economic history*, Vol. 49, Issue 4, pp. 803-832 (December 1989)

⁵⁰ Milan Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): p.2

mobilization and collective action against it. Raising the costs of collective action lowers the political costs of repression, i.e., allowing the regime to repress far more people before it galvanizes popular dissent and seriously erodes public support.

How, then, do the political costs of repression shape governments' strategic choices and ultimately, their domestic crisis management behavior? In a highly autocratic regime, at the onset of civil uprisings, lower political costs informs the political leadership of the high probability of its defeating the uprising through state repression. Essentially, governments will select a strategy of large-scale repression and escalating violence if the political costs of repression and escalation are lower than the costs of making policy compromise.⁵¹ Therefore, the government is likely to reject popular demands for political reforms and to persist in repressing its way out of the crisis to maintain political survival.

In addition, this higher capacity and probability of overcoming crises often inhibits large-scale elite defections thus maintaining the political coalition largely intact. More often than not, such regimes do succeed in suppressing domestic uprisings as happened in the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989 in China, the Algerian revolution-turned-civil-war of 1991, and the Iranian Green Revolution of 2009, a few of numerous other examples of suppressed uprisings. In fact, once the process is triggered, it becomes self-reinforcing; i.e. once high political terror is widely employed, government officials believe that they will be punished in the event of loss of office and this will most likely induce them to cling to power more resolutely by implementing measures that include further increasing the brutal crackdowns on dissenters.

⁵¹ Jan Henryk Pierskalla 'Protest, deterrence, and escalation: The strategic calculus of government repression' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 117-145 (December 2009): p. 126

The initial higher probability of defeating the civil uprisings coupled with the latter likely 'cruel' fate awaiting the political authority figures – since promises of amnesty by citizens are not credible – interact and help condition a regime's policy behavior. In the less likely event that citizens continue to mobilize despite the high levels of repression, they must accept the high price of the state's violent coercion, as is currently happening in Syria. Ultimately, a regime overcomes either the crisis or collapses in a war of attrition with its dissenting population, which might culminate in complete state failure, as was the case of Siad Barre's government in Somalia in 1991.

By contrast, in moderately autocratic regimes, at the onset of civil uprising, the comparatively higher costs of state repression provide cues or signals of a relatively lower capacity to defeat contentious collective action entirely through state violence. Government officials will initially resist demands for political reforms hoping that repressive measures will quickly stamp out domestic revolts. However, if citizens keep protesting while governments continue to repress violently, the costs of repression will soon approach a 'prohibitive' threshold beyond which renders further repression counterproductive and could jeopardize regime survival and state stability. Essentially, beyond this 'prohibitive' threshold, the political costs of employing violent repression are higher than the costs of offering policy concession.

The logic of political survival dictates then, that the government must reach a negotiated settlement with the citizens and participate in a 'pacted transition', allowing the regime to remain as a major political player with some 'exit guarantees' for its coalition. This condition serves in turn to safeguard its elites' interests in the new political order. More often than not, the need for such political compromises creates internal rifts within the government ranks, which are usually manifested in *coup d'état*, where the top leadership or the reviled public figures are often jettisoned from power to facilitate the regime's survival. This gives the embattled regime the opportunity to

remain intact and exert its influence through the deep state –; i.e., entrenched institutions – and hence improving its chances to come back to power either through democratic elections as in Ukraine in 2010 or through a military coup as in Egypt in 2013.

3. Research Hypotheses

Based on the above argument, previous scholarly findings and the researcher's own observations, the following hypotheses are advanced:

- **Hypothesis 1:** *As consolidation increases in an autocratic regime, reducing the political costs of repression, then the likelihood of the regime's use of repressive violence at the onset of contentious collective action increases.*

This is the main research hypothesis, but to facilitate testing, it will be broken in two parts:

- **Hypothesis 1-A:** *As an autocratic regime consolidation increases, the political cost of state repression decreases.*
- **Hypothesis 1-B:** *As the domestic political costs of state repression decreases, the government's willingness to violently suppress dissident collective action increases.*
- **Hypothesis 2:** *At the inception of a crisis, international costs do not influence the government's core crisis policy choices.*

This is based on the plausible assumption that international costs, in the form of economic/diplomatic/military sanctions, often begin after a certain period of time has elapsed within the crisis. During such time, governments have the benefit of advancing their own narratives of the events before evidence to the contrary is revealed and international costs begin to 'bite'.

- **Hypothesis-3:** *The authoritative decision unit changes throughout the crisis*

The authoritative decision unit constitutes those individual leaders in government who actually determine the crisis policy decisions. This decision unit could be a powerful leader, a group (cabinet level) or a coalition of autonomous actors.⁵²

- **Hypothesis-4:** *The greater the monopoly within decision making at the highest authority levels and the pursuance of victory based on short term goals, the more difficult it is to maintain a coherent suppression strategy*

4. Literature Review

This analysis attempts to understand the underlying motives that drive regime policy choices on the onset of uprisings. The core argument then falls within the literature of autocratic regime responses to contentious collective action and crisis management strategy and decision making.

4.1 Government Response to Contentious Collective Action

An enormous body of scholarship sought to explain why certain governments react with restraint and offer policy concessions on the onset of popular unrest while others retaliate with large-scale state-led violence. The topic of state repression is one of the oldest themes in political

⁵² Margaret G. Herman 'How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework' *International Studies Review*, Vol.3, Issue 2, pp. 47-81 (Summer 2001)

science going back to Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbs. The origin of the modern state partly accounts for its violent nature.⁵³ However, repression remains a hallmark of autocratic politics. In fact, several empirical studies have shown that repression is more associated with autocracies than with democracies.⁵⁴ Research in this field has found that state repression raises the costs of collective action by making it more difficult for groups to mobilize resources, thus decreasing contentious activities.⁵⁵

The centrality of repression in autocratic politics has led researchers to investigate the role of repression both as a dependent and as an independent variable.⁵⁶ As a dependent variable, researchers found a number of factors that influenced the level of repression, including: threats or the perception of threats confronting authorities,⁵⁷ by the violence and spread of protests,⁵⁸ by

⁵³ Anthony Giddens, *The nation-state and violence*, Vol. 2. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987).

⁵⁴ There are several studies that have shown negative relationship between repression and democracy, see for example: Conway W. Henderson 'Conditions Affecting the use of Political Repression' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 120-142 (March 1991); Steven Poe, C. Neal Tate and Linda Camp Keith 'Repression of Human Rights to Personal Integrity Revisited: A Global Cross-National Study Covering the Years 1976-1993' *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No.2, pp. 291-313 (June, 1999); R.J. Rummel 'Democracy, Power, Genocide, and Mass Murder' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 3-26 (March, 1995)

⁵⁵ See for example: James DeNardo, *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy in Protest and Rebellion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Ruud Koopmans 'Dynamics of Repression and Mobilization: The German Extreme Right in the 1990s' *Mobilization: An International Journal*, Vol. 2, No.2, pp. 149-164 (1997); Karl-Dieter Opp. and Wolfgang Roehl 'Repression, Micromobilization and Political Protests' *Social Forces*, Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 520-547 (December, 1990)

⁵⁶ For an excellent literature review of political repression, see: Jennifer Earl 'Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control' *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 37, pp. 261-284 (August, 2008)

⁵⁷ See for example: Christian Davenport 'Multi-dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry into Why States Apply Negative Sanctions' *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 683-713 (August, 1995); Christian Davenport (ed.), *Paths to State Repression*, pp. 1-24 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Jennifer Earl 'Tanks, Tear Gas and Taxes: Toward a Theory of Movement Repression' *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, pp. 44-68 (February 2003); Scott Sigmund Garter and Patrick M. Regan 'Threat and Repression: The Non-Linear Relationship Between Government and Opposition Violence' *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 273-287 (August 1996)

⁵⁸ See for example: Ted Robert Gurr and Mark Irving Lichbach 'Forecasting Internal Conflict A Competitive Evaluation of Empirical Theories' *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 19, No.1, pp. 3-38 (April 1986); Dipak K Gupta, Harinder Singh, and Tom Sprague 'Government Coercion of Dissidents Deterrence or Provocation?' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 301-339 (June 1993); Patrick M. Regan and Errol A. Henderson 'Democracy, threats and political repression in developing countries: are democracies internally less violent?' *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 119-136 (2002)

regime type,⁵⁹ by the organizational characteristics of the coercive apparatus,⁶⁰ by political opportunities and the prospect of winning,⁶¹ by media coverage,⁶² and by the need to preempt conflict at home from the diffusion of civil war in a neighboring country.⁶³ Unlike previous studies, this dissertation argues that its level of autocracy influences repression, in a given non-democratic state.

As an explanatory variable, scholars have largely focused on the effects of repression on dissent and mobilization, often referred to in the literature as the repression-dissent nexus (or the dissent-repression nexus). Research in this area has yielded different, and, at times, contradictory results: that repression prevents or quells non-institutional collective action through deterrence,⁶⁴ that it increases dissent particularly in the long term and in certain situations,⁶⁵ that the relationship

⁵⁹ See for example: Ted Gurr 'The Political Origins of State Violence and Terror: A Theoretical Analysis' in *Government Violence and Repression: A Agenda for Research*, George Lopez and Michael Stohl, eds. (New York: Greenwood, 1986); Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Bingham Powell, *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability and Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)

⁶⁰ See for example: Jennifer Earl and Sarah Soule 'Seeing Blue: A Police-centered Explanation of Protest Policing' *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 145-164 (June, 2006)

⁶¹ Raymond D. Duvall and Michael Stohl 'Governance by Terror' in *The Politics of Terrorism*, 3rd Ed., pp. 231-272 (New York: CRC Press, 1988)

⁶² See for example: Dominique Wisler and Marco Giugni 'Under the Spotlight: The Impact of Media Attention on Protest Policing' *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 171-187 (Fall 1999); Ruud Koopmans 'Repression and the Public Sphere: Discursive Opportunities for Repression against the Extreme Right in Germany in the 1990s' in *Repression and Mobilization*, Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston and Carol Mueller, eds., pp. 159-188 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

⁶³ Nathan Danneman and Emily Hencken Ritter 'Contagious Rebellion and Preemptive Repression' *APSA 2011 Annual Meeting Paper*, 2011.

⁶⁴ See for example: Ivo K. Feierabend and Rosaline L. Feierabend 'Aggressive Behaviors Within Polities, 1948-1960: A Cross-national Study' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 10, pp. 249-271 (1962)

⁶⁵ See for example: Paul D. Almeida 'Opportunity Organizations and Threat-induced Contention: Protest Waves in Authoritarian Settings' *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 109, No. 2, pp. 345-400 (September 2003); Paul D. Almeida, *Waves of Protests: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008); J. Craig Jenkins and Kurt Schock 'Political Process, International Dependence, and Mass Political Conflict: A Global Analysis of Protest and Rebellion, 1973-1978' *International Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 33, No.4, pp. 41-63 (Winter 2003/2004); Ronald A. Francisco 'The Relationship between Coercion and Protest: An Empirical Evaluation in Three Coercive States' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 263-282 (June 1993); Ronald A. Francisco 'The Dictator's Dilemma' in *Repression and Mobilization*, Christian Davenport Hank Johnston and Carol Mueller, eds., pp. 58-84 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Dipak K. Gupta, Harinder A. Singh and Tom Sprague 'Government Coercion of Dissidents: Deterrence or Provocation?' *The Journal of Conflict*

has a U-curve shape,⁶⁶ and an inverted U-curve.⁶⁷ In short, as there is an array of inconsistent findings, the repression-dissent relationship is still open for debate and scholarly theorizing.

Some scholars cite bureaucratic inertia as the reason why states employ repression: once governments adopt certain strategies in dealing with crises, they tend to maintain such strategies as ‘standard operating procedures’ regardless of changes in the intensity or nature of future crises. Unfortunately, some writers advance this argument without demonstrating a causal relationship, relegating the argument to almost the status of a cliché in the literature. A more interesting proposition is advanced by Moore in which he argues that the interaction of the state’s most recent behavior and the opposition’s response shapes the state’s policy choices towards contentious challenges, in ways that could alternate between repression and concession.⁶⁸

This dissertation approaches repression from a different angle. Specifically, autocracies repress efficiently at the optimal level, which is contingent on how ‘much’ the regime controls and dominates state institutions, resources and instruments of coercion and national discourse, and hence how state repression is permissive in a given polity, or regime consolidation. It also explains why authoritarian regimes highly invest in coercive apparatuses (military, police, intelligence, plain-clothed thugs, etc.). The higher the consolidation, on average, the higher the repressive and coercive means available to the authoritarian regime.

Resolution, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 301-339 (June 1993); Marwan Khawaja ‘Repression and Popular Collective Action: Evidence from the West Bank’ *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 47-71 (March 1993)

⁶⁶ See for example: Mark Irving Lichback and Ted Robert Gurr ‘The Conflict Process: A Formal Model’ *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 25, No.1, pp. 3-29 (March 1981)

⁶⁷ See for example: DeNardo, *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy in Protest and Rebellion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Edward N, Muller and Erich Weede ‘Cross-National Variation in Political Violence’ *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 34, No.4, pp. 624-651 (December 1990)

⁶⁸ Will H. Moore ‘The Repression of Dissent: A Substitution Model of Government Coercion’ *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vo. 44, No. 1, pp. 107-127 (February 2000)

Researchers have also argued that the costs or potential risks associated with post-power exits – such as loss of life – induce leaders to behave differently. Leaders are more willing to make concessions and reach a negotiated settlement in a conflict if the outcome does not affect their tenure and the consequences of losing office appear to be less punitive.⁶⁹ For example, Geddes, with her prominent typology of autocratic regimes, contends that party-based regimes tend to survive longer and resist compromise during crises if they think they can hold onto to power. By contrast, military-based regimes are more likely to negotiate their exit and less likely to hang on to power at all costs.⁷⁰ This dissertation will address Geddes’ major framework in-depth in Chapter 4, which analyzes rival explanations.

4.2 Crisis Strategy and Decision Making

Crisis management theories borrow extensively from IR theories on conflict and cooperation strategies, and more specifically from the theories of foreign policy decision making. As in inter-state conflicts, parties to an intra-state conflict may adopt a realist posture which views the world as a struggle for power, i.e., that conflict is inevitable and that military power ultimately determines conflict outcome.⁷¹ Realist actors in a conflict tend to demonstrate their resolve and to

⁶⁹ For example, see: Alexander Debs and H.E. Goemans ‘Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War’ *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 3, pp. 430-445 (August 2010); Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

⁷⁰ Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003)

⁷¹ Among the founding fathers of the classic realist school in international relations: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. M.I. Finley (ed.), Rex Warner (Trans.) (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972); Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1961); Thomas Hobbs, *The Leviathan*, Michael Oakeshott, ed. (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1946); Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (F.N. Maude, Ed.) (New York, B&N, 1968) (original work published 1832); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th edition (New York: Knopf, 1978); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994)

use others' fear of war to their advantage by threatening or using force to deter or defeat their adversary. Essentially, parties to the conflict may "threaten war to avoid it, and escalate a crisis to end it."⁷² However, crisis escalation strategies may lead to war with uncertain outcomes and possibly to the detriment of the escalator's interests, as opposed to terminating the crisis to their advantage as was initially intended.

By contrast, crisis management strategies may involve cooperative behavior through the gradual de-escalation of the crisis, as in the Gradual Reduction in Tension (GRIT), where a disputant makes a unilateral announcement and implements small but gradual conciliatory moves in anticipation that the opponent will respond equally and, in so doing, transform the nature of the conflict.⁷³ However, such strategy does not guarantee that the opponent will respond in kind and de-escalate the crisis; in fact, it risks the opponent's exploiting the accommodative moves and shifting the strategic position in its favor.

A classic theory in crisis management purports that under conditions of crisis, a government's decision making process may become highly centralized.⁷⁴ This can manifest as one of the following phenomena: concentration of power in the hands of small number of executives, or the concentration of power by the central government, or the tendency to confer decisional powers to strong leadership.⁷⁵ These generalizations led scholars to turn to decision-making models or theories to better understand state crisis behavior and, more specifically, the policy

⁷² Russell J. Leng, *Interstate Crisis Behavior, 1816-1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993): p.8

⁷³ Charles E. Osgood, *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1962)

⁷⁴ Charles F. Herman 'Some Consequences of Crisis which Limit the Viability of Organizations' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 61-82 (1963); Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean Decision* (New York: The Free Press, 1968); Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1972); John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage, 1989)

⁷⁵ Paul 't Hart, Uriel Rosenthal and Alexander Kouzmin 'Crisis Decision Making: The Centralization Thesis Revisited' *Administration and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 12-45 (May, 1993): p. 14

choices of political authority that at the outset may seem self-defeating. For example, prospect theory argues that leaders will likely take more risky policy choices, such as violent repression of collective dissent, if they are in the ‘domain of losses’, the latter term denoting dissatisfaction with the status quo.⁷⁶ The problem with this theory is that it is both reductionist and hard to quantify; perceptions of loss and orientation to risk ultimately reside in the minds of policymakers. Also problematic is that while the theory is modeled by its authors in probabilistic rather than deterministic terms, they fail to adequately explain the instances when the theory’s assumptions are violated.

The “Bounded rationality” model suggests that policymakers do not always choose the optimal solution (maximum utility with the minimum costs) due to a lack of information or accurate information, and that they instead keep rejecting unsatisfactory policy alternatives until they come upon the ‘good enough’ option, termed the satisficing solution.⁷⁷ In the “bureaucratic model”, policy choices are the result of bargaining and compromise between government institutions based on their institutional influence and the persuasive skills of their bureaucratic officials.⁷⁸ The cybernetic model, which is an extension of the bounded rationality model, argues that people maintain certain critical variables that allow them to filter in important information so that, when they face crises, they operate within the range of these critical variables or mental shortcuts.⁷⁹ This dissertation does not advance a new model for decision making. Instead, based

⁷⁶ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky ‘Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk’ *The Econometric Society*, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 263-292 (March 1979)

⁷⁷ Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior* (New York: MacMillan, 1958); Herbert A. Simon ‘A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice’ *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 69, No. 1, pp. 99-118 (February 1955); Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: The MIT press, 1997)

⁷⁸ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971); Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin ‘Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implication’ *World Politics*, Vol. 24, Supplement Theory and Policy in International Relations, pp. 40-79 (Spring 1972)

⁷⁹ John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimension of Political Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

on cybernetic theory, it argues that low political costs of repression are among the critical variables that leaders in autocratic governments operate from at the onset of crises.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Research Design

1. Within-region Comparative Case Study Analysis

This research will employ qualitative research methodology, focusing on a within-region comparative case study analysis of a few countries. This methodology requires an intentional selection of cases and this research will focus on specific high profile cases of crises with far reaching geopolitical consequences, which may prove to be more meaningful, informative and significant to policy prescription than the study of a random sample of cases, representative of a larger target population. The Egyptian and Syrian 2011 crises of mass uprisings represent pivotal events whose ultimate outcomes will most likely shape current and future politics in the Middle East; thus, this project uses both case studies for their “intrinsic significance”¹ as they are worthy of close examination in their own right. While two-case studies do not represent a diverse sample to provide for a 'hard test' of the hypotheses, the chosen cases show variations both in the independent and dependent variables while providing for relatively low variation in the control or confounding variables. It is important to note that it is not the objective of this research to generalize beyond the chosen cases.

¹ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994): p.15

2. Research Methodology

The chosen cases belong within the conceptual category of *crisis decision making*. Each case study does not represent a single crisis event, but rather a series of contentious collective actions, thereby increasing the number of observations and the testable implications of the research hypotheses. Each contentious event invites government response, and provides a *decision making occasion*. Each decision making occasion represents a unit of analysis. Needless to say, it is difficult to determine the exact moment when the policymakers made those crisis decisions without having access to the inner proceedings at the apex of government; however, it is plausible to suggest that governments made policy choices after every ‘stimulus’ or ‘impetus’; i.e., a rapid development or a major turn of events within a crisis.

Each occasion invited state action and its further decision point to a certain policy course. In addition, a government’s *ex post* response can help to infer the crisis decision making process of those with political authority in cases where it is not feasible to find out with total certainty what those decisions were and by whom they were made. In the Egyptian case, the study disaggregates the crisis – which covers period of January 14 to February 11, 2011– into several distinct decision making problems. Each problem emerged after a marked escalation of the crisis and demanded urgent response by the political authority. The study uses these decision-making instances as events of political contention, and not on the bases of the dependent or independent variables.

The Syrian case study has numerous crisis decision occasions and this project selects these points by focusing on contentious episodes and/or qualitative protest escalations. The study gives narrative priority to contentions where first-hand witness accounts from former officials or regime defectors are available, providing an inside look at the top political leadership deliberation and

policy choices. However, this research will focus specifically on the crisis decision-making process that happened before Syria plunged into an open civil war, since the focus of this research is state responses to crises of political contention and, more specifically uprisings, and not responses to armed conflicts or civil war.

Crisis analysis model will be employed in investigating the crisis-decision interaction and test the hypotheses. This approach involves breaking up the crisis into a set of decision making occasions and tracing in great detail the process of how each event unfolded, focusing on the pre-policy institutional setting, the formation of the decision unit at the onset of the crisis, the development of policy alternatives, the arrival at policy choices while at the same time examining empirical evidence and counterevidence that support or refute the hypotheses – or their inverse– and the contention-repression dynamics. The researcher will then compare, contrast and analyze the crisis decision making instances within each case, and, also across the two cases.

3. Measures of Autocratic Consolidation

This research will use the *Polity IV* dataset to measure the institutional dimension of regime consolidation. Marshall constructed the dataset by coding the following variables: regulation and competitiveness of political participation, openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment and constraints on chief executives.² This project uses this because it is designed to measure the level of regime authority over the state, independent from state repression. This point is important since the independent and dependent variables cannot both contain an aspect of repression as this

² Monty G. Marshall 'Polity IV Project Dataset User's Manual' *Center for Systemic Peace*, 2011. p.16

could result in false associations. Researchers in the social sciences currently use the dataset and it covers the countries in the chosen case studies since their independence until 2012.³

The study defines discursive power as the capacity of a regime to shape citizens' attitudes, opinions and perceptions in order to secure greater public support. In political science scholarship, researchers often measure ideology and political cultures through public polls, random surveys, how people cast votes or based on secondary sources of in-depth case studies. Since ideology is an intangible variable, one can only estimate its measurement by the proliferation of ideological symbols, rituals and practices. Through data gathered from secondary sources, the project uses the following indicators to gauge discursive power.

1. *Regime Ideological Clout*: Regimes that espouse a distinct ideology such as Marxism, Fascism, Communism and chauvinist nationalism are more capable of constructing a historical narrative that guides the state's actions, legitimizes the regime's elite's hold on power, prescribes the rules that govern rhetoric and norms of behavior, and possibly, even stage a sort of ideological consensus between the state and society. Ideologies often emphasize symbols of power that serve to expand the sphere of a regime's rhetorical influence in public places and enable dictators to disseminate their political propaganda. Observation seems to suggest that the higher the levels of consolidation, the more likely the regimes will embrace an official state ideology and disseminate political propaganda through state media and education.

2. *Freedom of the Press Score*: Regimes that enjoy high discursive power often restrict information flow and freedom of expression that may challenge its ideological narrative. In fact, the Press Freedom Index 2013 shows that highly autocratic regimes lead their list.⁴ It seems

³ <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity06.htm>

⁴ For example, North Korea (#178), Syria (#176) and Iran (#174).

plausible to presume that higher discursive power is inversely proportional to lower freedom of the press. The index lists 178 countries with most autocracies placed between the scores of 50 and 178. The study averages the press freedom score over time in order to measure the indicator.

Press Freedom Scale	High (178 to 160)	Medium 159 – 100	Low 99 – 50
Averaged Press Freedom Score			

Table (3)

3. *Merit of the Regime’s Legitimizing Narrative*: this measures the extent to which the regime’s legitimizing narrative is matched by reality. Simply, a regime that cannot deliver what it promises suffers credibility problems and this erodes its capacity to secure the consent of the ruled. By contrast, a regime has a higher legitimacy, credibility and popularity when it delivers on its promises and claims and is consistent with its political rhetoric and principled stance.

3. Measures of State Repression

State repression is a complex and multi-dimensional concept and various scholars have used different scales and means to quantify and aggregate overall levels of state repression. For exploring the relationship between regime consolidation and state repression, this research will employ the *Political Terror Scale* for the latter since it measures the macro political violence experienced by any country any year using 5-level scale.⁵

Refer to Press Freedom Index 2013, available from: <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html>

⁵ See: <http://www.politicalterrorsscale.org/>

4. Measures of State Crisis Response

The dependent variable, *regime response to contentious collective action*, can take one of two forms.

1. *Policy of Concession*: Where a government offers tangible policy concessions and either maintains or decreases the level of violent and non-violent repression. Tangible policy concessions or compromises refer to measures that include change of government, reversing unpopular policies, releasing political prisoners, modifying the constitution, negotiating with opposition leaders or including key members of the political opposition within the ruling coalition.
2. *Policy of Repression*: Where a government rejects popular demands and either maintains or increases the level of violent or non-violent measures. The increase in state repression can be qualitative – such as introducing new repressive tactics – or quantitative in nature – i.e., raising the severity of existing repressive measures.

5. Investigation and Data Collection

This research will use a wide spectrum of available secondary sources that include news reports drawn from both print and broadcast media, journalistic and scholarly studies, monographs, transcripts or audio-video sources documenting interviews and testimonies of former regime officials, government public statements and published documents. It is understood that journalistic sources and eye witness accounts may contain inaccuracies or reflect personal biases, hence when accounts differ, the study cross-checks information with other sources to assess authenticity and the plausibility of the evidence. The use of primary sources, such as interviewing actors who

participated in or had information about how the crisis decision making processes unfolded, will depend on the access to such persons and the level of risks posed to the researcher in conducting such interviews. The research will also seek statements by country experts and scholars.

6. Endogeneity

It is important to establish that variations in regime consolidation map onto variations in regime crisis response before one can actually infer a causal relationship. Endogeneity is a persistent problem in the social sciences that appears often in the forms of omitted variable bias and simultaneity. A randomized experimental research design eliminates both problems and allows researchers to make valid causal inferences. If research does not address endogeneity in non-experimental designs, it could threaten the estimated validity of the study. In other words, the observed associations would most probably not reflect the true relation between the variables and could render the inquiry practically useless both as a tool to understand the studied social phenomenon and to draw the proposed causal claims.

The hypothesized causal relationship of this research is that as the level of autocratic regime consolidation increases, the level of domestic political costs of state repression decreases. However, simultaneity or reverse causality may occur. More specifically, anticipation of domestic mass uprisings may provoke the government to employ higher levels of violent – and/or non-violent – repression to preempt, deter or mitigate the effects of popular collective action. By demonstrating greater capacity to violently suppress mobilized opposition and silence dissidents, the regime further expands its monopoly over politics and society and in so doing invariably increases its level of authoritarianism.

Qualitative methodology provides tools that help address the problem of endogeneity. Process tracing within case studies allows researchers to disentangle and trace sequences of events, establish the direction of causal inferences and place the explanatory variables and outcomes in their proper sequences. This research will seek to demonstrate that in the chosen cases, the independent variable preceded the dependent variable by measuring the level of authoritarian consolidation of the regime – and its political costs of state repression – before the onset of the regime’s crisis response.

7. Rival explanations

The task of inferring causation in politics is difficult and rarely achieved. In fact, Karl Popper famously argued that we can never prove a causal relationship in the social sciences, and hence researchers seek indirect proof by disproving rival hypotheses.⁶ Researchers accomplish this task by holding constant relevant variables from rival explanations within statistical analysis or by intensely testing those alternative theoretical implications via case studies. Alternatively, researchers can identify the most plausible competing hypotheses and address them before conducting their research by explaining why these rival explanations fail to adequately account for the phenomena in question or to consistently constitute a causal argument positing a causal relationship that describes how the political outcome unfolded in several cases. This accounting is the focus of the next chapter.

⁶ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

Chapter 4

Analysis of Rival Explanations

This research advances the proposition that regime consolidation, as a structural level variable, influence government policy choices – to negotiate and compromise, or to repress – at the onset of contentious collective actions that threaten to unseat ruling regimes from power. The literature on authoritarian politics advances a number of rival explanations that address regime conduct and political outcomes of anti-state social unrest. This section addresses the most relevant and prominent competing hypotheses and attempt to demonstrate that while these explanations have some merit, they neither tell the whole story nor do they adequately and consistently explain the variance in outcomes of the 2011 MENA uprisings.

1. Regime Type

To facilitate scholarship on authoritarianism, scholars have adopted *regime type* as the main paradigm to study comparative autocracy and, in the last 60 years, two waves of such typologies have dominated the literature. The first wave studied the early 20th Century regimes and the post-colonial dictatorships that thrived within the bi-polar world system. Within this first wave, researchers categorized these regimes as, totalitarianism,¹ bureaucratic authoritarianism,² one-

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, 1951); Karl Fredrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965)

² Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973)

party regimes,³ patrimonial,⁴ and military,⁵ just to name a few. The second wave emerged after the dissolution of the USSR, as democratizing pressures forced many autocracies to liberalize and transform, giving rise to a new set of regime categories, which includes the electoral,⁶ competitive,⁷ semi-authoritarianism,⁸ limited multiparty system⁹ and a range of other regime types and subtypes introduced by a number of scholars such as Geddes's seminal typology.¹⁰ Within this regime type paradigm, the major topic of research in authoritarian comparative politics has sought to examine regime behavior and its policy options to stay in power when faced with domestic threats and the prospect of losing office.¹¹

³ Samuel P. Huntington 'Social and Institutional Dynamics of One-Party Systems' in Samuel P. Huntington and Clement H. Moore, eds., pp. 3-45 *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society: The Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1970)

⁴ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1964)

⁵ Eric Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Amos Perlmutter, *Military and Politics in Modern Times: Professionals, Praetorians and Revolutionary Soldiers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977)

⁶ Larry Diamond 'Thinking about Hybrid Regimes' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 21-35 (April 2002)

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 51-65 (April 2002)

⁸ Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003)

⁹ Alex Hadenius and Jan Teorell 'Authoritarian Regime: Stability, Change, and Pathways to Democracy, 1972-2003' Working Paper #331, November 2006.

Available from: <http://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/331.pdf>

¹⁰ Barbara Geddes 'What Do We Know about Democratization After Twenty Years?' *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2 (June 1999): 115 - 144

¹¹ See for example: Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sandcastles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Milan Svobik 'Authoritarian Reversals and democratic consolidation' *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 102, Issue 2, pp. 153-168 (May 2008); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski 'Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats' *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 11, pp. 1279-1301 (November 2007); Beatriz Magaloni and Jeremy Wallace 'Citizen Loyalty, Mass Protest and Authoritarian Survival' Paper presented at the conference on *Dictatorships: Their Governance and Social Consequences*, April 2008, Princeton, NJ.; Milan Svobik 'Power-Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes' *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 477-494 (April 2009); Hanne Fjelde 'Generals, Dictators, and Kings: Authoritarian Regimes and Civil Conflict, 1973-2004' *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 195-218 (July 2010); Courtenay Conrad 'Constrained Concessions: Dictatorial Responses to Domestic Political Opposition' *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 55, Issue 4, pp. 1167-1187 (August 2011)

The current dominant paradigm of regime type, however, has posed many problems that potentially compromise the validity and reliability of empirical inferences.¹² First, most regimes do not fit an ideal regime type profile and are instead hybrids. Second, since regimes that fall within the same category can greatly differ on their level of authoritarianism and hence possess different regime capacities, lumping them together under the same grouping could contribute to flawed research outcomes. Third, and most significantly, the current existing paradigms have failed to predict the political outcomes of the 2011 civil uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa.

For example, Barbara Geddes, with her prominent typology of authoritarian regimes, contends that when challenged or confronted with “uncontrollable popular opposition”, party-based regimes survive longer and only negotiate when the end is near. She also observed that military regimes were more likely to negotiate their exits, and that personalist regimes will hang on to power at all costs and hence, confrontations are more likely to end in violence.¹³ Essentially, Geddes employs regime type as her explanatory variable by using rational choice perspective and institutional theory to point out that institutional arrangements and intra-elite bargaining power serve to structure incentives and motivate either elite cooperation or defection in a given political system. Geddes classifies autocratic regimes into single-party, military, personalist or hybrids based on who influences policymaking and controls government appointments.

In their typology, Geddes *et al* code both Egypt (1952 – 2011) and Syria (1964 – present) as single-party/personal/military regimes.¹⁴ This coding predicted that both regimes would have

¹² Milan Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): p.17

¹³ Barbara Geddes ‘*Authoritarian Breakdown: Empirical Test of a Game Theoretic Argument*’ paper prepared for the annual meeting of the APSA, Atlanta (September, 1999)

¹⁴ For coding, refer to Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, *Autocratic Regimes Code Book*, Version 1.1, p. 13-14. Available online from: <http://sites.psu.edu/dictators/>

responded to domestic crises such as uprisings in a similar fashion given their identical regime type; however, this outcome was not the case. Conversely, though they coded Tunis differently than Egypt,¹⁵ both regimes responded in a relatively similar fashion by employing comparatively moderate levels of repression combined with political compromises with the protesters. This in turn led to the ouster of the respective presidents from power and ultimately in engaging the opposition in a political transition process that culminated in the rise to power of their first democratically elected governments. These cases help illustrate that different regime types may respond in a relatively similar fashion to the same domestic crises; and, that regimes of similar types may react differently to similar domestic crises, which constitute as empirical evidence that challenges the theoretical claim that regime type plays a causal role in regime policy choices during crises.

Another prominent argument that has invoked regime type to explain the outcome of the 2011 uprisings argues that monarchies fared better than other regime types so much so, that the ‘Arab Spring’ can essentially be dubbed the “Arab *Republic*’s Spring”.¹⁶ The argument holds that “Arab kingships enjoy traditional religious and tribal legitimacy, which induces exceptionally loyal support from citizens”¹⁷ and that since “kings organizationally stand above everyday politics, they can skillfully intervene in the system to spearhead controlled reforms that defuse public discontent.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Geddes et al code Egypt (1952 – 2011) as party/personal/military, Syria (1963- present) as party/personal/military and Tunisia (1957 – 2011) as party-based. For coding, see Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, *Autocratic Regimes Code Book*, Version 1.1, p. 13-14.

¹⁶ Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III ‘Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On’ *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 74-88 (October 2012): p.74 (*emphasis in original*)

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.75

¹⁸ *Ibid*

Yom and Gause reject the idea of monarchical exceptionalism based on the essentialist logic of inherent features in their regime type by pointing out “such explanations do not hold up under scrutiny. For one, in March 2011 a social revolution nearly *did* succeed in Bahrain” and that “[t]here is no cultural or institutional DNA that renders royal regimes in states as disparate as Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia impervious to overthrow”.¹⁹ Suffice it to say, the overthrow of traditional monarchies in the postcolonial era, including the imamate in Yemen, the Senussis in Libya, and the Hashemite in Iraq – and many others that survived a close call – is a stern reminder that there are no unique or intrinsic qualities that make such regimes less vulnerable to popular discontent, or that can guard them from the fray of opposition politics.

In a recent article, Wilson examines the empirical limitations of other prominent regime typologies in the literature provided by Hadenius and Teorell (2007), and Cheibub et al (2009), in addition to that provided by Geddes (2003).²⁰ In employing comparative case analysis, he concludes that “different data sets on regime type lend themselves to concept stretching and misuse, which threatens measurement validity” and he demonstrates that “interchangeably using the data sets leads to divergent predictions, it is sensitive to outliers, and the data ignore certain institutions.”²¹ The author underscores the problems in coding rules, concept formation, criterion and content validity inherent in regime data sets and, therefore, the potential danger they represent to empirical inference and making causal claims.

¹⁹ Ibid, emphasis in original

²⁰ Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell ‘Pathways from Authoritarianism’ *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 143-156 (January 2007); José Antonio Cheibub, Jennifer Gandhi and James Raymond Vreeland ‘Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited’ *Public Choice*, Vol. 143, Issue 1-2, pp. 67-101 (August 2009); Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sandcastles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003)

²¹ Matthew C. Wilson ‘A Discreet Critique of Discreet Regime Type Data’ *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 47, Issue 5, pp. 689-714 (April 2014)

2. Centralization of Political Structure

In *Adaptable Autocrats*, Joshua Stacher examined how both the Egyptian and Syrian governments experienced their 2011 uprisings and why they responded to them differently.²² He employs *government power structure* as his explanatory variable in describing the political outcomes of both states. Specifically, he argues that Egypt has a highly centralized political system, concentrated in the executive that exercises near monopolistic control and hierarchical command over its bureaucracy and state institutions. Such power structure has imparted the state with a level of strength that facilitates the regime's control of its constituent parts, creates an efficient ruling coalition management, and, provides the regime' elites with greater governing flexibility.²³ Therefore, when the government confronted the political challenge that threatened regime survival, "Egypt's generals on the SCAF orchestrated the uprising's endgame by making the [military] council the executive."²⁴

By contrast, Syria's violent response is a function of its decentralized political system. Stacher argues that the Syrian regime resides over semi-autonomous institutions and 'power centers' that includes the military, the Baath ruling party, and the security services whose elites are empowered by the state. Elites in these institutions have a say in government policy, which in turn gives them a stake in regime political survival.²⁵ This political structure is purported to reflect a weak state characterized by an executive branch that lacks centralized control, an unclear governing hierarchy and an inefficient ruling coalition management system that has slowed the government's ability to respond to crises and has inhibited its capacity to adapt. Therefore, when

²² Joshua Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012)

²³ Ibid, p. 12

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid, p.13

the uprising erupted, regime elites could not agree on any specific policy and avoided bargaining with the protesters since it might have encouraged elite fragmentation.²⁶ As the crisis escalated, these elites banded together in pursuit of the lowest common denominator of saving the regime by unleashing lethal forces to suppress its dissenting population.

While Stacher makes a theoretically sophisticated argument, there is much evidence that contradicts his proposition. First, numerous high ranking former regime officials have underscored the direction of the flow of power in Syria's political structure and particularly the centrality of policy and decision making by the presidency before and during the uprising. For example, when asked in a televised interview how he assessed the leadership of Bashar Al Assad, with whom he has worked for a longtime, Prime Minister Riad Hijab, who defected in August 2012, answered stating, "Bashar does not depend on [state] institutions for policy decision making, unfortunately. Bashar consults few people in his inner circle such as his cousins Hafez and Rami Makhoul as well as few officers. Had Bashar depended on state institutions and allowed them to play their proper role in policymaking, we would not have been in this crisis to begin with."²⁷

Hijab also stated that he had accepted the position of prime minister after having reached the understanding with Assad that the new government would spearhead a national reconciliation as its main agenda. However, Assad reneged on his agreement by declaring the new government at the swearing-in ceremony as a "war government."²⁸ Another official, military commander, close confidante to Assad and perhaps Syria's most prominent defector to-date, is Brigadier General

²⁶ Ibid, p.17

²⁷ Hijab, Riad. Interview, *In Depth program*, Al Jazeera Channel (Arabic), Amman, Jordan: 22 October, 2012. All translations are by the author.

²⁸ Ibid

Manaf Tlass, often dubbed by the opposition as being “far too close to the regime.”²⁹ Tlass was asked who rules Syria in an interview with the BBC Arabic to which he answered, “a group of people rule Syria that primarily consists of the ruling family.”³⁰ In fact, scores of regime defectors who have appeared in televised interviews have often indicated their lack of influence over policy making as part of their reasons for having abandoned the regime.

Second, the swift hereditary succession of Bashar Assad points to centralized decision making within compliant and subservient state institutions. Stacher states “Assad assumed full command of the political system in June 2005. He replaced or retired many of the heads of the country’s various security services as well as long Baathist leaders. Some, including longtime vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam, escaped into exile. All of the replacements were Bashar al-Assad’s men.”³¹ Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that Bashar al-Assad did not only possess sufficient centralized power at the start of his regime but also enabled him to dislodge part of the entrenched old guard unharmed. In fact, having consolidated such remarkable power of appointment itself had made the power structure in Syria even more personalist, hierarchical and centralized by the time the uprising swept the region.

Stacher also added “in the Syrian case, decentralized power made Assad indispensable during the uprising because his staying in power guaranteed an attempt to maintain the current regime.”³² However, if the regime elites and their institutions had *voluntarily* submitted to the executive power for policy and decision making at the outset of the crisis thus centralizing political power, the argument would render Stacher’s proposition as untenable since decentralization would

²⁹ Elizabeth A. Kennedy ‘Manaf Tlass, Defected Assad Confidant, Seeks Syrian Unity’ *The Huffington Post*, July 26, 2012. Available from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/26/manaf-tlass-defected-assa_n_1705353.html

³⁰ Tlass, Manaf. Interview, *Bela Qiyod Program*, BBC Arabic, Paris: (published) 26 September, 2012.

³¹ Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats*, p.14

³² *Ibid*, p.18

no longer be the predictor variable of government response. Also, if the Syrian political authority became centralized early on, as the crisis escalated in Syria, then why did the regime behave differently than its Egyptian counterpart?

Most crucially, it is implausible that a decentralized power structure could have held together for over three years in a country embroiled in violent civil war. Analysts understand that political coalitions and alliances shift during conflicts based on the relative power distribution of warring parties, among many other reasons.³³ For example, the Syrian opposition outlined a proposal ahead of Geneva II for a political solution to the crisis in which Assad would step down and be given safe exile while the regime vice president or prime minister would lead post-Assad transitional unity government.³⁴ Had the Syrian regime been decentralized with semi-independent power centers, the logic of political survival would have dictated that these power centers accept the opposition's proposal. Since it presented the regime with a far greater probability of maintaining regime survival and preserving its economic interests in the transitional or new political order rather than continuing to bleed in a war of attrition whose outcome is unknown.

³³ See for example: Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

³⁴ See for example: Syria opposition votes to attend Geneva II peace talks, *BBC news*, 18 January 2014.

3. Civil-Military Relations

Civil-military relations (CMR) theories can provide plausible explanations for the conditions under which armed forces choose to either play an active role in a crisis of popular uprising by intervening in politics and throwing its weight behind its government to save an authoritarian regime or, conversely, to support the popular mobilization or assume a passive role by staying neutral. First, it is important to note at the outset that research on civil-military relations in the Arab region has received little scholarly attention and therefore, to some extent, the topic constitutes a lacuna in the literature.³⁵ It is no wonder that leading political scientists on the Arab world were astounded by both the 2011 mass uprisings and how the militaries reacted to them.³⁶

There is no doubt that the military's stance plays a major role in determining the outcomes of uprisings. In *The Role of the Military*, Zoltan Barany examines the six countries hit by the 2011 wave of civil unrest (Tunis, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen) and grouped them in three categories based on their military's responses, arguing that "[i]n Tunis and Egypt the soldiers backed the revolution, in Libya and Yemen they split, and in Syria and Bahrain they turned their guns against the demonstrators. These different stances by the armed forces largely explain the different outcomes of the revolutions."³⁷

Briefly, civil-Military relations generally refer to the interaction between the armed forces on the one hand and the government and civil society on the other. The concept considers the

³⁵ See for example: O. Barak and Assaf David 'The Arab Security Sector: A New Research Agenda for a Neglected Topic' *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 36, No. 5, pp. 804-824 (October 2010); Marsha P. Posusney 'Enduring Authoritarianism: Middle East Lessons for Comparative Theory' *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 127-138 (January 2004)

³⁶ See for example: G. Gause III 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability' *Foreign Affairs*, 81 (July/August 2011): p. 83; Jeff Goodwin 'Why we were surprised (again) by the Arab Spring' *Swiss Political Science Review* Vol. 17, Issue 4, pp. 452-456 (December 2011)

³⁷ Zoltan Barany 'The Role of the Military' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 24-35 (October 2011): p. 30

relationship as a bargain that allocates responsibilities and prerogatives, which ensures both the military's effectiveness and its submission to the civilian authority. In *Soldier and the State*, Huntington addressed the problem of maintaining military effectiveness versus subordination to the civilian authority. He proposed the concept of "objective civilian control" in which the civilian leadership encourages professionalism within the military establishment by granting it autonomy in running its affairs, and in return, a professional military will stay out of politics and voluntarily subordinate itself to the civilian authority.³⁸

Many social, economic and political factors shape civil-military relations in a given country, and they cannot be examined exhaustively here. Some of these factors were explored by Daniel Silverman, who:

has attempted to explain the divergent military behavior (so closely linked to the divergent outcomes) during the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria by analyzing five factors in each case thought to shape military decision-making: ethnic favoritism, regulated patronage, unregulated patronage, perceived legitimacy, and tactical control... the Tunisian military removed Ben Ali because of a lack of co-optation or coercion, the Egyptian military sought to replace Mubarak because of its economic privileges, the Libyan military repressed the uprising but suffered rapid large-scale defections because of its ethnic favoritism but weak tactical control, and the Syrian military has repressed the uprising with only slow small-scale defections because of its ethnic favoritism and strong tactical control.³⁹

The author further concludes "the cross-case comparisons yielded an embrace of complexity and a rejection of monocausal explanations, dichotomous outcomes, and unitary actors

³⁸ Samuel Huntington, *Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957): p. 81-85

³⁹ Daniel Silverman 'The Arab Military in the Arab Spring: Agent of Continuity or Change? A Comparative Analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya' *APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper*, p.48
Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2108802>

in civil-military relations.”⁴⁰ A number of scholars also highlighted cultural affinity with protesters or the degree of institutionalization of the military as other plausible explanations.⁴¹ As for the former, the argument posits that given the homogeneity of populations in Tunis and Egypt, whose military’s demographics generally resembles that of society, the soldiers refused to employ repression against their fellow citizens. However, regimes employed violent repression in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and Libya due to the lack of affinity with the protesters considering the prominent ethnic, sectarian or tribal cleavages prevalent in those societies.

As for the latter, it refers to the Weberian concept of bureaucracies and to whether governments organize institutions such as the military institutionally or patrimonially. Essentially, militaries are less institutionalized when a disproportionate percentage of its personnel are recruited on the basis of the communal loyalty that binds it with the regime for mutual protection, as in the cases of Syria and Bahrain. In such militaries, promotion and appointments are based more on loyalty and politics than on merit. The institutional integrity of these militaries are inextricably linked to the survival of the ruling regime, as the downfall of the latter will likely result in the communal purges of the former, and hence soldiers are more likely to stand by the regime at all costs. In fact, in these states, politicized societal fragmentation and primordial cleavages shape the military structure and its links to regime security as is the case in Syria.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid, 49

⁴¹ See for example: Eva Bellin ‘Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring’ *Comparative Politics* Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 127-149 (January 2012); Philippe Droz-Vincent ‘Authoritarianism, Revolutions, Armies and Arab Regime Transitions’ *The International Spectator* Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 5-21 (June 2011); Derek Lutterbeck ‘Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil-Military Relations’ *Armed Forces & Society* Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 28-52 (January 2013)

⁴² Marina Calulli ‘Societal Fragmentation and Military Systems in the Arab World: Syria's Civil-Military Relations in the Wake of the Arab Uprising of 2011’ *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche*, Vol. 1, pp. 101-130 (April 2013)

Conversely, when military recruitment does not privilege any particular communal group, is bound by merit-based rules for career advancement, and has its separate corporate identity, such as the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries,⁴³ this results in highly institutionalized institutions whose allegiance is pledged more to the state than the regime. When the uprisings erupted, such militaries refused to fire on protesters since their institutional survival was not linked with the persistence of the regime. This argument was further elaborated by Eva Bellin who argued that “[t]he *will* and *capacity* of the state's coercive apparatus to suppress democratic initiative have extinguished the possibility of transition. Herein lies the region's true [authoritarian] exceptionalism.”⁴⁴

Bellin contends that the robustness of a coercive apparatus is shaped by four variables: (1) the financial foundation of the security establishment and (2) the international support networks, which together determine the coercive apparatus' *capacity* to repress, (3) the level of institutionalization and (4) the level of popular mobilization, which together determine the coercive apparatus' *will* to repress.⁴⁵ However, the 2011 uprisings and how the patterns of events unfolded called into questions some of these arguments, and motivated the author to write a “reconsideration” of part of her earlier premise.⁴⁶ In this piece, she contends that decision to repress turned on the question of the coercive apparatus' will to repress rather than on its capacity to do so.⁴⁷ However, when examining these propositions, Michael Makara argues,

[T]hese factors provide an inadequate account of motivations to protect the ruling regime or defect to the opposition and confront a number of empirical anomalies. In Egypt, for example, cultural affinity cannot explain why the same military that was unwilling to repress the popular uprising against Hosni Mubarak behaved quite

⁴³ Eva Bellin 'The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective' *Comparative politics* Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 139-157 (January 2004): p. 149

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.143

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 144-146

⁴⁶ Eva Bellin 'Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring' *Comparative Politics* Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 127-149 (January 2012)

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 131

differently after the former president's ouster. While serving as the country's transitional government, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has sanctioned crackdowns against those who disapprove of the military's role in Egypt's transitional government, resulting in hundreds of casualties during Egypt's period of military rule.⁴⁸

Turning to the military's degree of institutionalization, the author posits

Empirically, such an explanation cannot explain why large segments of the Yemeni and Libyan security apparatuses defected amid mass protests, despite the fact that both displayed low degrees of institutionalization. Additionally, they cannot explain why the internal security services in both Egypt and Tunisia, which enjoyed a high degree of institutionalization, initially defended the ruling regime in each country. Theoretically, moreover, arguments that focus on degree of institutionalization do not provide a mechanism that accounts for the military's motivation to defect or remain loyal.⁴⁹

Various contextual factors influenced the CMR in the Arab states, but their professionalism, cohesion, leadership and performance have suffered tremendously by coup-proofing measures such as exploiting communal cleavages for loyalty to the regime, creating multiple parallel and competing forces and establishing security agencies to monitor loyalty and "guard the guardians."⁵⁰ Grouping different countries together for having similar military behavior without scrutiny may prove to be a flawed research strategy. The introduction of this section mentioned that Libya and Yemen had been grouped together as cases whose militaries split amid

⁴⁸ Michael Makara 'Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring' *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 334-359 (October 2013): p. 344

It is important to note that the Egyptian military that stood by when the police security forces and plain-clothed thugs killed 846 people during the 18-day uprising against Mubarak's regime, was the same military that, in a single day, had killed over 800 protesters while dispersing the sit-in in Rab'a in August 14, 2013 after ousting the first democratically elected president Mohammed Morsi. Human Rights Watch, following a year-long investigation, has described the violent crackdown in Rab'a the "world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history." Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt*, August 12, 2014.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ See for example, Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Böhmelt 'Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99' *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 331-350 (September 2011); James T. Quinlivan 'Coup-proofing: Its practice and consequences in the Middle East' *International Security*, Vol. 24, No.2, pp. 131-165 (Fall 1999)

the mass protests; however, the defection of part of the armed forces could be attributed to quite different reasons. For example, in the Libyan case, Gaddafi's mistrusted the army, after a failed military coup attempt in Tripoli in 1975, and four other attempts thereafter. As a result, he intentionally sought to weaken the national army as a coup-proofing measure,⁵¹ by establishing parallel forces of the Revolutionary Guard as well as by embedding the military with highly trained, equipped and funded units – such as the 32nd Battalion – whose personnel were exclusively drawn from the Gaddafi tribe and run by Gaddafi's son Khamis.⁵² Florence Gaub argues “the Libyan regime had no intention of creating strong cohesion in its military force. After all, it was the cohesiveness of the Free Officers Movement that produced the coup of 1969”⁵³ and so when “put to test, such as in Chad or during the uprising of 2011, the Libyan armed forces' cohesion proved to be feeble.”⁵⁴

While theories of CMR shed light on why the Arab militaries followed divergent paths as popular protests challenged their governments, no one factor can adequately explain all the cases. In assessing the outcome of uprisings through the CMR perspective, Glen Segell argues that,

Inducing a single understanding of the events based on existing CMR theories is not possible. The evidence shows that the results of the events were determined by the willingness or lack thereof of the military to support the incumbent. In each country this differed. Even if the causes of and catalysts in the unrest were the same in all affected countries, the results and the outcomes were different. This is because each state, as both Mills and Waltz have noted, has its own unique political system and unique institutions of state which can lead to conflict.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Florence Gaub 'The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-proofing and Repression' *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 221-244 (February 2013): p. 229

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 237

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 230

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 232

⁵⁵ Glen Segell 'The Arab Spring and Civil-Military Relations: A Preliminary Assessment' *South African Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 42-59 (2013): p. 43

4. Rentierism

Scores of scholars have addressed the relationship between rentier autocratic states on the one hand and their capacity to deal with destabilizing social unrest and maintain regime survival on the other hand.⁵⁶ States should externally derive revenue from natural resource rents as well as account for the majority of their sources of income to qualify as a rentier state.⁵⁷ The rentier state argument is generally twofold: first, natural wealth affords states the capacity to establish extensive patronage networks and a comprehensive social welfare system that maintains the political loyalty of large segments of society. In a state that plays the role of benefactor and where populations are dependent on government for welfare packages from jobs to healthcare, people are not likely to press for radical political change and may prefer the status quo instead.

Second, rentier states have the financial power to fund monitoring agencies and robust repressive institutions that can preempt dissent and/or suppress them should they occur. One scholar found that “oil wealth is robustly associated with increased regime stability, even when controlling for repression, and with lower likelihoods of civil war and anti-state protests.”⁵⁸ Another concludes that “[o]ther things being equal, autocracies that derive more of their national income from oil, natural gas, and other mineral resources are substantially less likely to transition

⁵⁶ See for example the following recent work: Joseph Wright, Erica Frantz and Barbara Geddes ‘Oil and Autocratic Regime Survival’ *British Journal of Political Science*, pp. 1-20 (2012); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith ‘Leader Survival, Revolutions, and the Nature of Government Finance’ *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, Issue 4, pp. 930-950 (October 2010); Jørgen Juel Andersen and Silje Aslaksen ‘Oil and Political Survival’ *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 100, Issue 1, pp. 89-106 (January 2013); Jesus Crespo Cuaresma, Harald Oberhofer and Paul Raschky ‘Oil and the Duration of Dictatorships’ *Public Choice*, Vol. 148, Issue 3–4, pp. 505-530 (June 2010)

⁵⁷ Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab state: Politics and society in the Middle East*. (New York: IB Tauris, 1996): p.227

⁵⁸ Benjamin Smith ‘Oil Wealth and Regime Survival in the Developing World, 1960–1999’ *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 232-246 (April 2004): p.232

to democracy”⁵⁹ which corroborates Ross’s finding that oil hurts democracy.⁶⁰ The implication here is that these autocracies are less likely to experience democratizing mass protests and regime-threatening social upheavals.

Theories of the rentier state are often invoked to explain why uprisings erupted and conflict escalated in non-energy exporting states such as Egypt and Syria while oil exporting states have escaped the regional wave of mass protests largely unscathed. Yom declares “geopolitical support and oil wealth have played a more tangible role in insulating royal leaders from internal pressures.”⁶¹ However, a closer look at the 2011 uprisings demonstrates that access to oil rents does not satisfactorily explain the variance in outcomes across different states.

For example, both oil-rich Libya and oil-poor Syria responded quite similarly to the uprisings by rejecting calls for reform, by employing excessive state violence and by escalating the conflict into civil war. In fact, protests in Libya continued despite Gaddafi’s early announcement of the allocation of \$24 billion to housing funds and the proposal to double government employee’s salaries.⁶² Libya is a typical rentier state that enjoys a welfare system that has placed it highest overall in the human development index (HDI) in the African continent.⁶³

More generally, oil-financed patronage neither enabled the Shah of Iran to calm protesters nor averted the regime change in 1979 nor did it prevent Algeria from descending into civil war in

⁵⁹ Jay Ulfelder ‘Natural Resource Wealth and the Survival of Autocracy’ *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 8, pp. 995-1018 (August 2007): p. 1012

⁶⁰ Michael L. Ross ‘Does Oil Hinder Democracy?’ *World politics* Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 325-361 (April 2001)

⁶¹ Sean L. Yom ‘Understanding the Resilience of Monarchy during the Arab Spring’ *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 2012.

⁶² See for example: *Libya Sets up \$24 bln fund for housing*, Reuters, January 27, 2011.

⁶³ *Human Development Report 2010: The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): p. 144

1991. Interestingly, in spite of the \$130 billion spending spree,⁶⁴ Shiites-led protests erupted in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and have continued for many months despite intense media blackouts.⁶⁵ By contrast, non-energy exporting states such as Jordan and Morocco were able to contain their protests through a strategy of limited concessions of top-down constitutional reforms combined with moderate repression while neither resorting to massive social spending that they could not afford nor addressing underlying the problems of unemployment, urbanization and deteriorating social services to placate protesters.⁶⁶ In Bahrain, the outcome of popular mobilization does not appear to be linked to its non-rentier economy given its low and declining oil production. Longstanding grievances among the majority Shiite population provoked the uprising in the country and it was regional solidarity among the GCC members and their attempt to prevent the dangerous precedent of a fallen monarchy and potential domino effect that motivated Saudi-led GCC to intervene and enable the Bahraini government to suppress protests.

All the aforementioned examples cast doubt on the argument that the political outcomes of the 2011 uprisings were a function of a state's access to hydrocarbon wealth. Most importantly, research on oil and politics has reached contrasting claims and the relationship is far from being conclusive. For example, studies find that oil undermines regime stability since it transforms the state from the business of domestic extraction through production and taxation, to that of distribution and payment transfers, which in turn may lead to the absence of a tax bureaucracy whose role is crucial in enhancing state capacity.⁶⁷ In addition, the lack of extraction and reliance

⁶⁴ Neil MacFarquhar 'In Saudi Arabia, Royal Funds Buy Peace for Now' *The New York Times* 8 (2011): A1.

⁶⁵ See for example: *Reporting Saudi Arabia's Hidden Uprising*, BBC News, May 30, 2014

⁶⁶ See for example: Muriel Asseburg, ed. 'Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World: Actors, Challenges, Implications and Policy Options' *German Institute for International and Security Studies*, Berlin, February 2012, p.6

⁶⁷ Jacques Delacroix 'The Distributive State in the World System' *Studies in Comparative International Development* Vol. 15, Issue 3, pp. 3-21 (Fall 1980)

on ‘unearned income’ obviates the need for representation, which produces a weak state-society linkage that engenders a level of instability often compounded by economic crises in boom and bust cycles.⁶⁸ Conversely, regimes with natural resource rents can generously invest in repressive institutions capable of responding decisively to opposition during crises and of maintaining authoritarian resiliency.⁶⁹ In addition, the inequitable distribution of patronage and welfare spending among the populace may ultimately incite resentment, promote dissent and civil conflict.⁷⁰

Theory	Causal Mechanism	Predicts/Explains	Fails to Predict/Explain
Regime Type	Intra-elite bargaining	Durability/Breakdown of political regimes	Egypt, Syria, Tunis and Bahrain
Centralization of Political Structure	Capacity to adaptation	Government response to Uprisings	Libya, Syria
Civil-Military Relations	Institutional Dominance	Military’s stance in response to crises	Egypt, Syria
Rentierism	Access to rent/ supply of loyalty	Conflict Behavior	Libya, Syria, GCC

Table (3)

⁶⁸ Afsaneh Najmabadi ‘Depoliticisation of a Rentier State: the Case of Pahlavi Iran’ In *The Rentier State*, Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., pp. 211-227 (London: Croom Helm, 1987)

⁶⁹ Michael L. Ross ‘Does Oil Hinder Democracy?’ *World politics* Vol. 53, No. 03, pp. 325-361 (April 2001)

⁷⁰ See for example, Leonard Wantchekon ‘Why Do Resource Abundant Countries Have Authoritarian Governments?’ *Journal of African Development* Vol. 5, Issue 2, pp. 145-176 (2002); Gwenn Okruhlik ‘Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States’ *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 295-315 (April 1999)

The 2011 Egyptian Uprising

“This is not Iran or Algeria, you know. Everything is under control...We will never make the same mistakes as them. There will never be instability or uprising...It will never happen here.”¹

When the 2011 uprising erupted in Egypt, neither the incumbent nor the protesters expected that such an event would ultimately produce a fundamental political change within a few weeks. Both parties recognized the tremendous repressive capacity the regime could use to maintain order and secure its survival in office. Less than two years before, the Iranian government decisively quashed mass protests – dubbed the ‘Green Revolution’ – which followed the disputed results of the 2009 presidential elections. By early 2011, the counter waves to the Color Revolutions had been unleashed with a vengeance: the party that was dislodged from office in the Ukraine Orange Revolution is back in power, and the governments of Uzbekistan and Ethiopia committed massacres – and genocide in the case of Sudan – in their quest to suppress social mobilization-turned insurgency. The use of populism, hyper-nationalism and pseudo-democratic institutions allowed rulers such as Putin in Russia and the late Chavez in Venezuela, among many others, to consolidate their hold on power and backtrack on democratic gains. The international political climate was neither too hostile to authoritarian regimes nor too critical of the violent practices used to secure authoritarian survival.

This case study is organized in five chapters. The first chapter explores the potential causal connection between the Mubarak regime’s level of authoritarianism and the political costs of state repression. The second chapter constitutes the core of this dissertation and it will analyze the 18-day uprising by dividing it into a series of crises of collective actions and investigating the

¹ Egyptian senior state security officer addressing author Maye Kassem in 2004. Quoted in Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule* (Boulder CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 2004): p. 192

government's responses as events unfolded. The third chapter examines whether or not the decision-making unit changed throughout the crisis and the implications on its outcome. Exploring the extent to which international costs or pressure influenced government policy response is the focus of the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter studies the state's crisis management strategy.

Chapter 5

Authoritarian Consolidation and the Political Costs of State Repression

The first proposition advanced in this research posits a relationship between a regime's level of autocracy and its capacity to afford the political costs of repressing its citizens. Specifically, it is argued that *as regime consolidation increases, the political costs of state repression decreases*. To measure the extent of Egypt's authoritarian consolidation, one must look at two aspects of state power. The first to consider is institutional power; which constitutes a regime's *hard power*; i.e., the degree of dominance over state institutions, national resources and the concentration of policy and decision making within the executive. The second aspect to consider is discursive power, described as a regime's *soft power*; in other words, its capacity to influence public opinion in order to cultivate political loyalty and secure popular support. This chapter will begin by examining institutional power, using the Polity IV scores followed by a brief analysis of how such level of autocratic consolidation actually manifested in the political, economic, coercive, and judicial arenas. Secondly, it will assess Egypt's discursive power using secondary sources. Having established the regime's consolidation scores with particular attention at Mubarak's last decade in office, these will be mapped against government scores for violent repression – using political terror scale – to observe if a recurring pattern exists between said variables.² This mapping seeks to supplement, not replace, the descriptive narrative, which would follow, to identify the potential causal mechanism at work. The chapter will end by summarizing the findings and conclusions.

² Non-violent repression in the form of restrictions on civil liberties is endogenous to autocratic consolidation and hence will not be used in the measurements.

1. Institutional Power

Using country-year format, the Polity score measures institutionalized authority traits by coding variables that include “openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment”, “competitiveness of political participation”, institutional “constraints on the executive” and the “regulation of participation”.³ Essentially, by measuring a regime’s extent of power sharing and government’s separation of powers, the score reflects the institutional dominance of a given polity over the state. Egypt (1981-2010) maintained an average score of -5 ,⁴ and in various regime typologies, Mubarak’s regime falls within the categories of semi-authoritarian,⁵ electoral authoritarianism,⁶ and competitive authoritarian regime⁷ for having the features of democratic institutions with controlled political pluralism and narrow space for contestation. Egypt is a one party state with limited political participation. Therefore, from an institutional perspective, Mubarak’s regime falls within the category of moderately authoritarian.

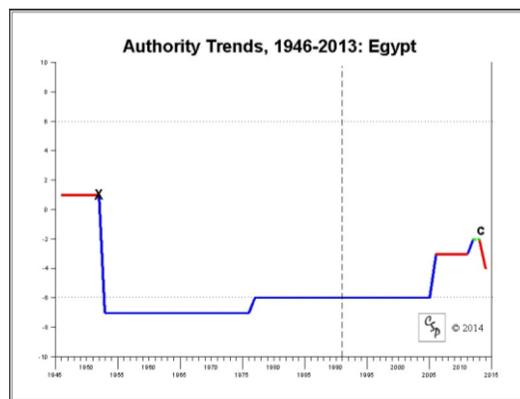


Figure-1: Egypt Polity IV scores (1945 – 2013). Source: Polity IV Country Regime Trends

³ Monty G. Marshall 'Polity IV Protect: Dataset User's Manual' *Center for Systemic Peace*, November 12, 2010, p. 16

⁴ Polity IV project categorizes regimes based on their scores as follows: autocracy (-10 to -6), anocracy (-5 to +5), and, democracy (+6 to +10).

⁵ See for example: Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003): p.8

⁶ Andreas Schedler 'Electoral Authoritarianism' in *The SAGE handbook of Comparative Politics*, Todd Landman and Neil Robinson, eds., pp. 381-394 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2009)

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

In the graph above, changes in the 2005 authority trends can be attributed to limited democratic improvements following the introduction of the country's first multi-candidate presidential elections and a small political opening in electoral participation that allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to gain an astounding 88 seats in the legislature. Below is a synopsis of how the regime consolidated its institutional power in the political, coercive, judicial and economic domains.

1.1 Consolidation of Political Power

Mubarak inherited a personalized authoritarian regime and maintained its practices through the emergency laws that remained operative during his tenure. While the Egyptian constitution enshrines a multiparty system, the regime built the political structure of a dominant party that maintained control of all political institutions but also allowing the opposition to form parties, cultivate grassroots support, recruit followers, and contest presidential and legislative elections. This is in contrast to the more authoritarian structure of a one party system, as is the case of Syria for example, which is far more constrictive to political participation and where opposition parties are not allowed to visibly emerge or operate; hence, they are incapable of forming parties, opening offices and challenging the ruling regime electorally.

The 1971 Constitution, in effect until the mass protests in 2011, granted the president enormous authority over all branches of government with little reference to accountability.⁸ In addition, Mubarak's Egypt managed state-society relations through "a balanced use of patronage

⁸ Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics*, p. 23

and skillful cooptation, the adoption of exclusionary laws and the coercive apparatus of the state.”⁹ It co-opted many civil society leaders, intellectuals, and even opposition figures in exchange for access to certain privileges and benefits provided by the institutionalized distribution network of its patronage system.¹⁰ Wealthy elites were assimilated into the authoritarian establishment through lucrative deals brokered by the state while government subsidies on energy and basic foodstuffs retained the support, or acquiescence, of large segments of society and maintained the perception of social peace.¹¹ Such arrangements created a class within the bureaucracy that was not only dependent on the incumbent but also had a vested interest in its survival. Also, repression through intimidation, arbitrary detention and police brutality was employed to keep tabs on opposition forces, activists and civil society organizations. To contain the threat of the most organized opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak maintained constitutional prohibition on the establishment of political parties on ethnic, religious or racial grounds, which forced many of the MB members to drop from the electoral race, to ally with other smaller opposition parties or to join the ruling NDP, the latter being a strategy of co-optation that proved successful in controlling the MB in Jordan.¹²

In 2005, under pressure for reform, the regime allowed multi-candidate presidential elections for the first time, and made changes to the political party law. This culminated in the Muslim Brotherhood gaining 88 seats in the legislature, while the NDP kept a majority of over two thirds. Mona El-Ghobashi, political science professor at Bernard college, argued that

⁹ Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics*, p. 3

¹⁰ Ninette S. Fahmy, *The Politics of Egypt: State-Society Relationship* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009)

¹¹ Ivan Ivekovic ‘Egypt’s Uncertain Transition’ in *Egypt’s Tahrir Revolution*, Dan Tschirgi, Walid Kazziha and Sean McMahon eds. (Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013): p. 174-175

¹² Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in the New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): p.84

“[p]arties, elections, and civic associations were allowed but carefully controlled, providing space for just enough participatory politics to keep people busy without threatening regime dominance.”¹³ However, by 2009, the hopes that Egypt was moving steadily towards political reforms were soon dashed as the government reversed gears by cracking down on dissent, weakening the opposition and jailing MB members. By this time, Gamal Mubarak and his business cronies in the cabinet had assumed authority over much of the government’s decision-making power.¹⁴ For Gamal to succeed his father, the regime perhaps believed an even more malleable parliament was needed and it hence sought to dislodge the opposition from the legislature and passed laws that removed judicial monitoring of elections.¹⁵ Such endeavors culminated in the brazen rigging of the 2010 Parliamentary elections, which produced ‘the most fraudulent elections in Egypt’s modern history’ and resulted in the NDP gaining 97 percent of the seats, and the Muslim Brotherhood nil. In protest, various opposition forces formed a symbolic parliament in the streets, and when Mubarak was informed, he commented “let them have fun.”¹⁶ This proved to be a gross miscalculation since by driving out the opposition parties from formal institutions, the regime unwittingly turned them to non-institutional means of politics: street protests, which proved fatal on the morning of January 25, 2011. In fact, the blatant rigging removed any semblance of democratic legitimacy and served to embarrass and alienate prominent actors within the incumbent’s ruling coalition.¹⁷ Seeking to consolidate its hold on political power to pass its

¹³ Mona El-Ghobashi ‘The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution’ in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing eds. (New York: Verso Books, 2012): p.21

¹⁴ See for example: Abdel Kader Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule* (Cairo, Egypt: Akhbar Al Youm – Cultural Section, 2012) (Arabic): p. 13-26

¹⁵ Mona El-Ghobashi ‘The Dynamics of Elections Under Mubarak’ in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing eds. (New York: Verso Books, 2012): p.142-143

¹⁶ Amr Hassan ‘Hosni Mubarak: The rise and fall of a strongman’ *Ahram online*, October 14, 2014.

¹⁷ Abdel Latif El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The 18 Days of Mubarak: An Insider’s Account of the Uprising in Egypt* (London: Gilgamesh Publishing, 2012): p. 106

succession scheme came at the expense of popular legitimacy and demonstrated that the regime was no longer interested in maintaining a façade of democracy.

Despite the restrictive laws aimed at constraining civil society,¹⁸ the state had been less successful in achieving their objectives as societal actors such as Islamists, opposition forces, human rights groups, NGOs, and professional associations continued to challenge the state, circumvent its regulations and defy bans on collective actions.¹⁹ Since the year 2000, Egypt witnessed a significant number of protests ranging from those opposing the US war on Iraq, supporting the Palestinian intifada to those demanding political reforms. In 2005, a grassroots coalition comprising members of Egypt's diverse political spectrum launched a series of demonstrations against Mubarak's bid for another presidential term, chanting *Kefaya* (Enough), which spawned into a political movement that proved critical in organizing the mass protests of 2011.

In short, while the regime wielded considerable power over domestic politics using a range of legal constraints, exclusionary practices, electoral fraud and coercive measures, “civil society under Mubarak has witnessed considerable expansion”²⁰ and continued to challenge the state through existing institutional means, to wrestle more political freedoms, to oppose its supremacy in the political domain, to compete for state resources, to wage legal battles in courts and to stage

¹⁸ To constrain civil society and political activism, the Mubarak regime passed a restrictive law, among other measures, known as Law 84 of 2002 that “empowers the government to shut down any group virtually at will, freeze its assets, confiscate its property, reject nominees to its governing board, block its funding, or deny requests to affiliate with international organizations.”

‘Egypt: Dissolution Ultimatum for Independent Groups’ *Human Rights Watch*, August 30, 2014

¹⁹ Philippe Droz-Vincent ‘The Security Sector in Egypt: Management, Coercion and External Alliance Under the Dynamics of Change’ in *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East*, Laura Guazzone and Daniel Pioppi (eds.) (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2009): p. 237-239

²⁰ Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics*, p. 104

protests and labor strikes across the country; measures which are all commensurate with the regime's moderate authoritarian structure.

1.2 Consolidation of Coercive Powers

Formal coercive institutions in Egypt consist of the military, police and intelligence services. As the supreme commander of the armed forces, Mubarak exercised control of the military through selection, promotion and retirement of its top branch commanders and the heads of its services. Walid Kazziha, professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, argues:

Most senior officers reported to the president directly without necessarily going through the official hierarchy of the army. They all served at the pleasure of the president, who had the final word in retaining or dismissing them from service.²¹

The regime had undergone a process of civilianization beginning with Sadat; gradually diminishing the role of the military in governance and purging its centers of power, but the process accelerated during Mubarak's era as the ruling NDP assumed the role of main repository of political power.²² In fact, senior officers in active service were keen to keep a low profile and not show a desire for political careers to avoid incurring the wrath of their supreme commander, who in 1989, retired a highly decorated, charismatic and popular defense minister, Abou Ghazala for allegedly harboring political ambitions.²³ Mubarak provided the military with numerous incentives

²¹ Walid Kazziha 'Egypt Under Mubarak: A Family Affair' in *Egypt's Tahrir Revolution*, Dan Tschirgi, Walid Kazziha and Sean McMahon eds., (Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013): p. 40

²² Imad Harb 'The Egyptian Military in Politics: Disengagement or Accommodation?' *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Spring 2003): p. 282

²³ Walid Kazziha, *Egypt Under Mubarak*, p. 40

and privileges to secure their loyalty and remain docile, apolitical and submissive. The regime allowed the military establishment to expand its share of the local economy by taking vast state projects, increasing its access to profits and diversifying its portfolio.²⁴ In addition, retired high-ranking police and military officers were often appointed governors to provinces or managers of numerous state-led enterprises.²⁵ Employing such a corporatist strategy, ensured that the Armed Forces remained complacent with their allotted benefits and privileges. In fact, “[t]he corporate interests of the military mean that it is among the main beneficiaries of the authoritarian status quo and is wed to that status quo.”²⁶

Habib al-Adly, a close confidant of Mubarak and also known as a fierce supporter of Gamal’s succession project headed the Ministry of Interior. Under al-Adly’s long tenure (1997-2011), the police forces expanded tremendously that, by the time Mubarak was overthrown, the police reached an estimated total strength of 1.4 million or 1.5 times the combined size of the military force.²⁷ Emergency law bestowed on the interior ministry draconian powers that criminalized much of public life through detention, torture and imprisonment of individuals without charges or fair trials, turning Egypt into a textbook police state.²⁸ To Mubarak, al-Adly proved very effective in suppressing dissent and maintaining domestic peace by pervading and monitoring all facets of public life. Mona El-Ghobashi argues:

Mubarak’s was not a police state because the coercive apparatus routinely beat and detained people. It was a police state because the coercive apparatus had become the chief administrative arm of the state, aggregating the functions of several agencies. Police not only deal with crime: they issue passports, drivers’ licenses, and birth and death certificates...fix all national and subnational elections, vet

²⁴ Steven A. Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007): p. 17

²⁵ Yezid Sayigh ‘Above the State: The Officers’ Republic in Egypt’ *Carnegie Center*, August 2012, p. 6

²⁶ Philippe Droz-Vincent, *The Security Sector in Egypt*, p. 225

²⁷ Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State*, p. 6

²⁸ Elizabeth Dickinson ‘Anatomy of Dictatorship: Hosni Mubarak’ *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2011

graduate-school candidates and academic appointments at every level; monitor shop floors and mediate worker-management conflicts; observe soccer games and Friday prayers; and maintain a network of local informants in poor neighborhoods.²⁹

Omar Suleiman, Egypt's spy chief for 18 years, kept a tight control of the General Intelligence Service and was a close and trusted ally of Mubarak. Suleiman was a major pillar of the regime and as 'Egypt's feared domestic enforcer'³⁰ he came to be well known for keeping a close watch over opposition activities, in particular, for his containment and maltreatment of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was not a surprise then, that at the outset of the uprising Mubarak turned to Suleiman appointing him vice president and entrusting him to manage the crisis and thus save the regime. Former US Ambassador to Egypt, Margaret Scobey, in a classified cable sent to the State Department and later revealed by WikiLeaks, describes that "EGIS' [Egyptian General Intelligence Service] Chief Omar Suleiman and Interior Minister al-Adly keep the domestic beasts at bay, and Mubarak is not one to lose sleep over their tactics."³¹ In effect, Mubarak did not worry about the particular tactics of his security services as long as they contained political participation and prevented the escalation of protests and demonstrations from ever threatening the regime.

While Mubarak had the loyalty of coercive institutions, the rise of the "security state" had relegated the military to the background and intensified institutional turf battles.³² The renowned Egyptian journalist and regime insider Mohammed Hassanain Haykal reported that the SCAF had been unhappy all along with Gamal's economic policies and had quietly resented the plans to have him succeed his father. They believed if Gamal became president, public outrage would intensify

²⁹ Mona El-Ghobashi, *The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution*, p.24

³⁰ Steven A. Cook 'Tales of Omar Suleiman' *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2012

³¹ Ambassador, Margaret Scobey (2009 – 05 – 19) 'Scene setter: President Mubarak's Visit to Washington' *WikiLeaks*. WikiLeaks cable: SECRET CAIRO 000874.

³² Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State*, p. 15

and could spiral out of control as Egyptians overwhelmingly rejected the return to dynastic rule.³³ It might also lead to the restructuring of the regime coalition by purging the ‘old guard’, increasing the institutional irrelevance of the military in governance, and, by dismantling its economic interests in favor of Gamal’s ‘new guard’. Haykal reported that senior officers within the SCAF had agreed by early 2010 that if popular demonstrations were to erupt due to Gamal’s nomination or by his assuming the presidency, the military would not intervene nor use force to quell such popular unrest.³⁴ Normally, institutions do not expend their resources and put their legitimacy on the line when the threat of purging looms large. In short, demonstrating that the military’s loyalty to Mubarak was not absolute, but rather contingent on being able to maintain its institutional interests and its vast economic-industrial complex. This conditional loyalty was indeed evidenced by an emerging split within the regime’s coalition by the mid-2000s on the issue of Gamal’s presidential plans.³⁵ As will be discussed in the next chapter, this split proved consequential in shaping the outcome of the January 25th uprising.

1.3 Consolidating the Judicial Power

Autocracies often use constitutions and judicial rules to increase the executive’s power rather than to restrain it. Regimes manipulate the judiciary to promulgate laws that provide legal cover for a range of government actions, which include constraining civil liberties, limiting political participation, hindering the opposition’s access to power and promoting compliance to

³³ After all, it was ending the corrupt dynastic rule of King Farooq that bestowed the 1952 free officers’ coup the legitimacy to rule Egypt for over 60 years

³⁴ ‘Haykal: Sisi refused to protect the heir apparent Gamal Mubarak’ *El Bashayer*, January 3, 2014 (Arabic)

³⁵ See for example: Stephan Roll ‘Gamal Mubarak and the Discord in Egypt’s Ruling Elite’ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 1, 2010

the state.³⁶ While the Egyptian constitution asserted judicial independence, it empowered the executive over the judicial branch by making the president the head of the Supreme Council of Judiciary Organizations,³⁷ by granting him the authority to appoint and promote judges,³⁸ to designate the public prosecutor, to create special courts and to issue decrees with the force of law in both normal and emergency circumstances.³⁹ Since coming to power, Mubarak governed under emergency law, which virtually suspended civil rights guaranteed by the constitution such as the prohibition of torture, conducting searches without warrants and violating fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, the right to congregate peacefully and the right to form unions and associations.⁴⁰ It also granted the state wide-ranging powers to arrest individuals without formal charges against them, and to imprison them without trial under the guise of ‘preventive measures’.⁴¹ Furthermore, by stipulating that constitutional guarantees are “determined by law”, the government was able to justify its restricting civil rights with the force of law.⁴²

While Mubarak had far-reaching authority and influence over the judiciary, attempts to completely dominate it did not go unchallenged. Ultimately, the independent judges within the Supreme Judicial Council were able to retain, to some degree, the Council’s professional

³⁶ See for example: Tom Ginsburg and Tamir Moustafa, *Rule by law: The Politics of Courts in Authoritarian Regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

³⁷ Egypt’s 1971 Constitution, Article 137

³⁸ Article 44 of the Judiciary Law

³⁹ *Ibid*, Articles 112 & 147

⁴⁰ In 1971, Anwar Sadat increased presidential powers in the constitution, which included the powers to appoint and dismiss government and cabinet ministers, issue decrees that have the force of law, declare states of emergency and dissolve or bypass the parliament through referendums. These powers remained unchanged under Mubarak. Sadat later admitted “Nasser and I are the last pharaohs! You think Nasser needed documents to govern, or you think I do?...I put these powers for those who would come after us: ordinary presidents.” Ahmed Baha’ Al Din, *My Dialogues with Sadat* (Cairo: Dar al Hilal, 1987): p.64 (Arabic). Quoted in, *The Journey to Tahrir*, p. 126

⁴¹ *Amnesty International*, 2001 Annual Report on Egypt

⁴² Mona El-Ghobashi ‘Unsettling the Authorities: Constitutional Reform in Egypt’ in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing, eds. (New York: Verso Books, 2012): p.127

autonomy.⁴³ In fact, the Supreme Constitutional Court made several rulings that were not favorable to the regime. Abdel Monem Said Aly, director of the Regional Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo and Chairman of Al Masry Al Youm newspaper argues that,

The [Supreme] Constitutional Court has annulled more than two hundred laws. It also declared elections to the People's Assembly in 1984, 1987, 1990, 1995, and 2000 illegal owing to the lack of requisite judicial supervision as provided in the constitution. Indeed, during the past few years of the Mubarak regime, the Judiciary had been in a state of semi-rebellion over the issue of judicial independence, including its right to an independent budget.⁴⁴

Among several cases, one prominent judicial 'battle' is illustrative. In the run up to the 2005 referendum to amend Article 76 of the constitution, which allowed for multi candidacy for the Egyptian presidency,⁴⁵ a controversy emerged on the definition of judicial bodies entrusted to supervise the elections. Opposition parties sought to exclude pro-regime legal staff from electoral monitoring to prevent vote rigging. The government argued that its own attorneys and prosecutors were part of judicial bodies, and when the matter was referred to the Supreme Constitutional Court, a regime loyalist judge issued an opinion concurring with the government's position. When the president of the SJC concurred with the ruling party and sought to silence independent judges, it mobilized thousands of judges across Egypt to declare in a public meeting their demands for clean elections and, on election day, the Judges' Club established a fact-finding mission that reported and widely published its observations of the discrepancies during the referendum. This forced the government to make some changes in the following presidential and parliamentary elections

⁴³ Mona El-Ghobashi, *The Dynamics of Elections Under Mubarak*, p.139

⁴⁴ Abdel Monem Said Aly 'State and Revolution in Egypt: The Paradox of Change and Politics' *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, Brandies University, Essay 2, January 2012, p.50

⁴⁵ Article 76 allowed multiple candidates to run for presidential elections, however, it was an unpopular amendment since it further empowered the executive, giving the president, for the first time, the power to dissolve the parliament without a referendum as well as it had made it extremely difficult for any candidate to stand up against Mubarak. The conditions for candidacy were highly skewed in favor of the incumbent.

scheduled for the same year.⁴⁶ Such a legal ‘battle’ sent a message: That while the government could dominate the judicial and electoral processes, independent judges were there to deprive the electoral outcomes from being perceived as legitimate both domestically and internationally. This lack of legitimacy, especially compounded by the fraudulent 2010 elections’ historic proportions, came back to haunt the regime at its darkest hour during the January 25th uprising.

No authoritarian regime allows a fully independent judiciary and Mubarak was able to tame the courts by using “direct and indirect tools to incentivize judicial self-restraint and discourage judicial activism.”⁴⁷ However, while there were many compliant judges willing to do the regime’s bidding in order to secure early promotions or lucrative secondments at embassies and international organizations, it is also true that there were other independent judges who stood firm against the incumbent’s attempts to pass unconstitutional legislations, even at the risk of punishment through transfer to remote areas or loss of promotion.⁴⁸ In short, the Egyptian judiciary maintained a minimal level of independence and corporate identity.

1.4 Consolidation of Economic Power

Egypt’s economy underwent significant changes in the last few decades; from the nationalization policy and state-led development during Nasser, to the economic opening and foreign investments dubbed *infitah* during Sadat, and finally to Mubarak’s major restructuring through liberalization, deregulation and privatization. While the World Bank and the IMF helped introduce neoliberal policies to shrink the role of the state and cut down on public spending, the

⁴⁶ Mona El-Ghobashi, *The Dynamics of Elections Under Mubarak*, p.139-140

⁴⁷ Sahar Aziz ‘Egypt’s Judiciary, Coopted’ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 20, 2014

⁴⁸ Ibid

government remained the dominant economic actor. In addition, the last decade of Mubarak's tenure was particularly marked by an increasing accumulation of wealth in the hands of few regime elites and a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots.

In the early 1990s, the government launched the privatization of many public sector economic enterprises as part of its structural reforms aimed at reducing the fiscal deficit, improving efficiency and gaining access to foreign markets, investments and technologies.⁴⁹ However, economic privatization amounted to no more than shifting monopolies from the government to the hands of Mubarak's cronies who bought state-owned enterprises at discount prices.⁵⁰ For example, Ahmed Ezz, a close associate of Gamal Mubarak and an influential NDP member, managed to abolish anti-monopoly laws and acquired a state-owned mega steel company that gave him ownership of 70 percent of the steel industry in the country.⁵¹ This transfer of ownership of many public industries to roughly two dozen conglomerates of powerful monopolies and oligopolies not only dominated Egypt's economy, but also led to the layoff of thousands of Egyptians. As these profit-seeking enterprises shed their initially bloated workforces they added to Egypt's unemployment levels and worsened social inequalities.⁵² Ulrich G. Wurzel, a political economist, argues that

The major objective of the regime concerning its economic reform program has been to reorganize and consolidate its power system and not to lay the foundations necessary to make the national economy more competitive on the international

⁴⁹ Privatization Coordination Support Unit 'The Results and Impacts of Egypt's Privatization Program' *Special Study 2002*, by CARNA Corp. under the USAID and Monitoring Services Project.

⁵⁰ Stephen King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009): p. 114

⁵¹ Ibid, p.203

⁵² Timothy Mitchell 'Dreamland: The Neoliberalism of Your Desires' in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing eds. (New York: Verso Books, 2012): p.230

scene... [And the] massive direct and indirect control of the economy by the regime has been one of the foundations of its political survival.⁵³

While liberalization and privatization measures had led to an impressive annual growth rate averaged at 5.3% (2000-2010), said growth mostly benefited the small business oligarchy of the ruling party and failed to trickle down as manifested by the increasing poverty rates.⁵⁴ In fact, liberalization of trade did not enhance the country's economic competitiveness since the regime granted import licenses to a number of well-connected monopolists who drove out many smaller local businesses and used their leverage to keep barriers against external competition.⁵⁵ In addition, tax laws established an inverted pyramid whereby high-income earners were taxed less than the middle class.⁵⁶ Consolidating the nation's economic power into the hands of the regime's elites was designed to cement their political influence through buying votes, hiring thugs to intimidate challengers and coopting citizens through patronage. *Wasta*, or personal relations through the regime's vast clientelistic networks, were necessary for average Egyptians to navigate ordinary matters of daily life: to get a job, to obtain scholarships, to secure a bank loan or receive adequate medical care in public hospitals.

From 2004 onward, powerful businessmen associated with Gamal Mubarak were appointed as cabinet ministers who in turn institutionalized the means of their self-enrichment. The increased concentration of their wealth was reflected in the nation's rising rate of corruption particularly in the latter years of the Mubarak regime. Corruption was so rampant that, by 2010,

⁵³ Ulrich G. Wurzel 'The Political Economy of Authoritarianism in Egypt: Insufficient Structural Reforms, Limited Outcomes and A Lack of New Actors' in *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East*, Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, eds. (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press 2009): p. 99

⁵⁴ Percentage of population at the national poverty line: 16.7% in the year 2000, 19.6% in 2005, 21.6% in 2009 and 25.2% in 2011. Source: World Bank

⁵⁵ Ulrich G. Wurzel, *The Political Economy of Authoritarianism in Egypt*, p. 100, 101

⁵⁶ Ahmad El-Sayed El-Naggar 'Economic Policy: from state control to decay and corruption' in *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, Rabab El Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, eds. (New York: Zed Books, 2009): p. 38-39

Egypt stood between Burkina Faso and Mexico in the Transparency International's corruption perception index⁵⁷ and, the annual flow of illegal transfers out of the country rose in the last decade to an estimated \$6.4 billion.⁵⁸ More importantly, coopting wealthy businessmen through lucrative government contracts led to a vicious cycle of increasing inequality and self-reinforcing crony capitalism: businessmen used their wealth and connections with high ranking regime members to run for seats in the legislature, while those in office exploited their political power to increase their wealth.⁵⁹

It is important to note that other factors contributed to the increasing gap between rich and poor: a soaring rate of inflation led incomes to plummet in real terms, the rising number of younger people entering the labor market every year outstripped the number of jobs available and thus increasing unemployment eroded family incomes as the jobless young had to stay home. However, the regime was more preoccupied with filling its own pockets and fattening its clientelistic networks than with providing necessary services and maintaining the infrastructure to keep up with the population growth.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2010/results>

⁵⁸ The Global Financial Integrity Organization estimates the annual flow from Egypt in the period between 2000 and 2008, at \$6.4 billion

⁵⁹ Ivan Ivekovic, *Egypt's Uncertain Transition*, p. 176

⁶⁰ When Mubarak became president in 1981, Egypt's population was estimated at 45 million. By 2011, the population has almost doubled to 82 million. Source: The World Bank

2. Discursive Power

Discursive power represents the ideational aspect of a political system and the ‘grand narrative’ that underpins its legitimacy. Ideology, defined as “meaning in the service of power”⁶¹ is critical to maintaining state-society power relations. Citizens can submit to state power, but to accept and actively support the regime – which is critical to forming a political support base – there has to be a compelling or mobilizing ideology.

Authoritarian regimes normalize and legitimize their hold on power in the sight of public opinion by dominating the means to produce discourse, primarily the media.⁶² Three factors are crucial in measuring the extent of a regime’s discursive power. First, whether or not a regime adopts an official ideology. Second, the degrees of restrictions on independent media and the public’s access to alternative sources of information, which is best reflected by the state’s press freedom score. This aspect is critical since a regime’s hegemonic narrative unchallenged by alternative sources will have greater sway over mass opinion given that the public is exposed only to official discourse and the regime’s interpretation of events, construction of meaning and portrayal of different social groups.⁶³ Third, the extent to which the legitimizing narrative is matched by reality. Simply, a regime that cannot deliver what it promises suffers credibility problems and this erodes its capacity to secure the consent of the ruled. Therefore, by examining the above factors, one can assess a regime’s soft power. Discursive power is crucial since

⁶¹ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Hodder Arnold Publication, 1995): p.14

⁶² Other sources such as religious institutions and school education play a role in shaping social beliefs and perceptions, but media outlets, which will be the focus of discursive power, remain the primary source of production, reproduction and reinforcement of hegemonic discourse and narrative.

⁶³ See for example: Stuart Hall ‘The Rediscovery of “ideology”: Return of the repressed in media studies’ in *Culture, Society, and the Media*, Gurevitch et al, eds., pp. 56-90 (London: Routledge, 1982); Teun A. van Dijk ‘Opinions and Ideologies in the Press’ in *Approaches to Media Discourse*, Allan Bell and Peter Garret, eds., pp. 21-63 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); Teun A. van Dijk ‘Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis’ in *Language and Peace*, Christina Schaffne and Anita Wenden, eds., pp. 17-33(Dartmouth: Dartmouth Publishing Company Limited, 1995)

ideological regimes are often more repressive than their non-ideological counterparts, and in Egypt, “[o]f the three regimes [Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak], the Nasserist state resorted most frequently to repression of political dissent, justifying its actions in terms of protecting the gains of the revolution.”⁶⁴

2.1 State Ideology

Egypt sees itself as a natural leader of the Arab World given its cultural, historical, geographic and demographic endowments. However, Mubarak’s regime did not espouse or propagate any distinct ideology or political philosophy and avoided defining itself in any specific transnational mission, perhaps due to the terrible experiences of his predecessors. Nasser’s populist Pan-Arab nationalism culminated in its ignominious defeat in the Six-day war and Sadat’s *volte-face* with Israel incited popular disillusionment, alienated part of his regime’s coalition, radicalized Islamist factions and ultimately led to his assassination. At the personal level and beyond the public’s gratitude for Mubarak’s role in the 1973 war, the president lacked charisma and competence and was often described as ‘Egypt’s accidental president’.⁶⁵

Most importantly, the regime refrained from deriving popular legitimacy and securing loyalty on religious, sectarian or ethnic bases. Amr Hamzawy, an Egyptian political scientist and human rights activists, argues

⁶⁴ Curtis Ryan ‘Political Strategies and Regime Survival in Egypt’ *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, pp. 25-46 (Fall 2001): p. 8

⁶⁵ It was widely believed that Sadat chose Mubarak precisely because the latter was weak, lacked charisma and would remain in his shadow and never pose a threat. A very popular joke in Egypt is that “When Nasser became president, he wanted a vice president stupider than himself to avoid a challenger, so he chose Sadat. When Sadat became president, he chose Mubarak for the same reason. But Mubarak has no vice president because there is no one in Egypt stupider than he is”

Issandr El Amrani ‘Three Decades of a Joke that Won’t Die’ *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2011.

Contrary to the regimes in other Arab states in the Levant and the Gulf, the Egyptian government has never sought to cast its domestic tyranny in a sectarian, ideological, or tribal light or to legitimize its authoritarian ways by stirring up hatred in society along sectarian, ideological, racial or tribal lines. The Egyptian government has never monopolized the resources and wealth of the state and society on sectarian, ideological, racial, or tribal bases.⁶⁶

In brief, Mubarak's regime lacked any specific transnational mobilizing ideology and he was content to assume the role of a regional broker and thus build the image of his non-ideological and moderate Arab regime.

2.2 Freedom of the Press

During Mubarak's era, Egypt witnessed the emergence of private satellite channels, the launch of opposition party newspapers and increasing access to the internet, in large part due to changes in the global media landscape. In brief, the press was classified into four types.⁶⁷ First, the *state press*, regarded as the voice of the Egyptian government and which includes *Al Ahram* and *Al Gomhoria*. Second, the opposition party press, which included over a dozen newspapers, and often contained mild criticisms of the government. Third, the independent press such as *Al Masry* *Al Youm* and *Al Shorouk*,⁶⁸ were more critical of the regime but without crossing the 'red lines'.⁶⁹ And finally, the international press, which was often not censored. Mark Peterson, a scholar in anthropology and mass communications and author of *Connected in Cairo*, argues that broadcast

⁶⁶ Amr Hamzawy 'Salvaging What Remains of the Nation State: The Missing Example of Egyptian Democracy' *Atlantic Council*, July 22, 2014.

⁶⁷ Mark Allen Peterson 'Egypt's Media Ecology in a Time of Revolution' *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 14, summer 2011, p.2

⁶⁸ In fact, by early 2011, circulation of opposition newspapers, *al Masry al Youm*, *al Dastour* and *al Shorouk* surpassed that of the pro-regime papers, *al Ahram*, *al Akhbar* and *al Gomhuriya*
See, Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 2-3

⁶⁹ See for example: William Rugh, *The Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press): p.156

television had a similar pattern of division and followed self-censorship given the “vague laws that prohibited journalists and broadcasters from saying or writing things that might damage “the social peace,” “national unity,” “public order” or “public values.””⁷⁰ Therefore, media discourse in Egypt was never monolithic, but rather pluralistic. El-Ghobashi argues that “[t]he media was relatively free, giving vent to popular frustrations. And even the wave of protests that began to swell in 2000 was interpreted as another index of the regime’s skill in managing, rather than suppressing, dissent.”⁷¹

It is noteworthy that the emergence of transnational media and the growing diversity of sources of information had broken the monopoly of information dissemination, allowed greater access to public discourse, challenged the state’s hegemonic narrative, empowered the opposition to articulate and present their own ideas to the rest of the population and hence enabled the dissemination of competing claims. Regime critics and intellectuals, such as Hassanain Haykal and Abdel Halim Qandil, used the Al Jazeera channel, among other platforms, to lambast the government to a far greater audience across the Arab world for its incompetence, its minimizing of Egypt’s leadership role in the region, its subservience to US policies, its trailing behind on development indicators and on its apparent attempts to groom Gamal and return Egypt to dynastic rule. In general, “[t]hese media, as well as civil society movements, had already awakened an educated public to the reality of Mubarak’s regime.”⁷²

The proliferation of social media networks and mobile phones further undercut the traditional monopoly over information “by breaking some major stories, and reporting in unique

⁷⁰ Mark Allen Peterson, *Egypt’s Media Ecology in a Time of Revolution*, p. 3

⁷¹ Mona El-Ghobashi, *The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution*, p.21

⁷² Dan Tschirgi, Walid Kazziha and Sean McMahon eds., *Egypt’s Tahrir Revolution* (Boulder, CO, Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2013): p. 17

ways on others, contributed to the overall climate in which the pre-2011 Egyptian regime was unable to control public discourse and enforce its dictates without opposition.”⁷³ The Egyptian entertainment industry followed suit with numerous theatrical plays and films depicting government malfeasance, economic grievances, police violence, rampant nepotism, the staggering unemployment and impending social disintegration and so “[t]he image of a thoroughly corrupt regime was reinforced in best-selling novels and popular movies that became favorite topics of conversation”.⁷⁴ Figure-2 below shows Egypt’s press freedom score, which oscillated within the 100-150 range, remained commensurate with a moderately restrictive media environment. In short, while the government had maintained a substantial monopoly over media outlets, its official and hegemonic narrative had always been seriously challenged.



Figure-2: Egypt 2002-2014 Press Freedom Scores & Country Ranking,
Source: Reporters without Borders

⁷³ David M. Faris, *Dissent and Revolution in a digital age: social media, blogging and activism in Egypt* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013): p.51

⁷⁴ Dan Tschirgi et al, *Egypt’s Tahrir Revolution*, p. 16

2.3 Merit of the Regime's Legitimizing Narrative

The government under Mubarak shifted from the Nasserite populist discourse⁷⁵ to a debate focusing on economic reforms, the market and the emergence of a new private sector. For both domestic and international audiences, the regime projected an “image of a development-oriented national leadership that is able to deliver, if not prosperity and wealth for the majority, at least some relief from economic misery and social decline for the population”⁷⁶ as well as the “images of a ‘clean’ (corrupt-free) and efficient government of experts, of the alleged success of the economic reforms”⁷⁷. In addition, to consolidate his grip over power and justify government violence against the opposition, Mubarak “propagated the myth of a modernizing, secular regime besieged by the forces of violent Islamism and thus “forced” to resort to repressive measures, such as the military trials of civilians and the prolonged detention and torture of thousands of Islamist activists.”⁷⁸ In his own words Mubarak described the essence of his regime's objectives was “[to] completing the promised political reform to firmly establish complete democracy, to support the role of the parliament and the parties, strengthen the independence of the judiciary, and to keep religion from politics.”⁷⁹ In addition, during elections, the Mubarak regime would hang banners across major streets calling people to vote “for the sake of stability and development.”

There had been a growing discrepancy between the regime's rhetoric on the one hand and its promises, claims and ‘deliverables’ on the other. First, “[t]he standard-bearers of the narrative that depicted Egypt as an emerging market and democracy were the individuals and groups that

⁷⁵ Nasser's populist discourse emphasized revolutionary principles such as liberation from British colonialism, national independence, state sovereignty, redistribution of national wealth, development and Pan-Arab nationalism

⁷⁶ Ulrich G. Wurzel, *The Political Economy of Authoritarianism in Egypt*, p. 120

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 107

⁷⁸ Mona El-Ghobashi, *Unsettling the Authorities*, p.121

⁷⁹ Hosni Mubarak Speech on the Workers Holiday, May 6, 2010. Quoted in Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 168

made up the constituency for autocracy – big businesses regime-affiliated intellectuals, the armed forces, internal security services, and the bureaucracy.”⁸⁰ In fact, “the image of the Mubarak presidency remained for many Egyptians one of a besieged government whose policies on social and economic development amounted to running in place and little more.”⁸¹ In terms of its claims on economic reforms, “Egypt’s improved macroeconomics and social indicators throughout the 2000s masked the fact that, for the vast majority of Egyptians, the social contract that promised security, a job, health, and an education had not just failed miserably, but was torn asunder.”⁸² The economic privatization schemes “had seen Egypt largely abandon its legacy of support for workers and peasants. The very language of ‘peasants and workers’, once a prominent prop of the authoritarian populist model of rule, disappeared from the lexicon of the regime, unable or unwilling to abide by the social contract.”⁸³ Rising unemployment, widespread poverty, the deteriorating social safety net, a crumbling infrastructure, rampant corruption, police brutality and social injustice came to be the hallmarks of Mubarak’s regime and severely undermined its rhetoric of protecting or looking after Egyptians. Alaa Al Aswany, the renowned Egyptian writer, argued:

Conditions in Egypt have reached rock bottom in the full sense... Would anyone have imagined that Egyptians would end up drinking sewage water? The number of people who have died on the ferry that sank, on burning trains, and on collapsed buildings is more than the number who died in all the wars Egypt has fought.⁸⁴

Most crucially, “stability became the catchword of Mubarak’s rule. However, thirty years after Mubarak unexpectedly became president, stability paradoxically produced an environment

⁸⁰ Steven S. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 183-184

⁸¹ Curtis Ryan ‘Political Strategies and Regime Survival in Egypt’ *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, pp. 25-46 (Fall 2001): p. 14

⁸² Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 181

⁸³ Omar Dahi ‘The Political Economy of Egyptian and Arab Revolts’ *Institute of Development Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, January 2012, p. 52

⁸⁴ Alaa Al Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What Made the Revolution Inevitable* (New York: Vintage, 2011): p.5

conducive to instability.”⁸⁵ Labor and political unrest, police violence, the spread of slums and social decay belied all claims of stability.

In response to the threat of the Islamist power grab, the regime presented itself as the only hurdle to a theocratic rule. However, the ploy of depicting the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat to the way of Egyptian life in order to justify its authoritarian continuity became unraveled: the influence of the MB in society grew as they filled the space where the government failed by funding an elaborate network of social services. Hafez Ghanem, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institutions, argues that

the Mubarak regime’s policies have probably helped expand the Brotherhood and make it more popular. Most activist youth joined Islamist movements who provided them with an alternative moral and cultural community. Islamist organizations also provided youth with services like libraries and sports facilities that the Mubarak regime did not deliver. Thus the Brotherhood gradually built its grassroots support and strengthened its organization across the country, especially in poor rural areas.⁸⁶

Most significantly, the regime did not only *fail* to implement its promised democratic reforms throughout Mubarak’s tenure, but rather *deepened* its authoritarian rule in its latter years as the arguably minor democratic gains and political openings of the 2005 electoral processes reversed while the government stepped up its violent repression of opponents.⁸⁷ It also failed to protect minorities⁸⁸ and engaged in blatant election frauds to facilitate Gamal’s becoming

⁸⁵ Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 274

⁸⁶ Hafez Ghanem ‘Egypt’s Difficult Transition: Why the International Community Must Stay Economically Engaged’ *Global Economy and Development at Brookings*, Working Paper 66, January 2014, p. 10-11

⁸⁷ In the 2006-2010 period “State security intensified its efforts to break the Muslim Brotherhood as a potential political force through waves of arrests that some believed left more members of that organization in prison than at any time during Nasser era.” Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle of Egypt*, p. 207

⁸⁸ “Copts were generally supportive of the Mubarak regime, since it was viewed as a barrier against Islamic fundamentalism. During the few years leading up to the revolution, however, there were an increasing number of attacks against Copts. During this period, the regime not only failed to protect the Copts; it also failed to address

president.⁸⁹ Indeed, the regime's failures within the economic, social and political domains have dealt heavy blows to its legitimizing narrative, and to its claim to power and self-promoted image as a liberalizing, reformist and distributive political system.

In short, Mubarak's regime lacked an ideology. The regime allowed a partially free media environment that seriously challenged its hegemonic discourse and had, at best, a weak legitimizing narrative that not only failed to 'manufacture consent', but was also unable to maintain the continued support of much of its political base; namely, the middle class, who constituted the bulk of protesters on January 25th uprising.⁹⁰ Therefore, Egypt under Mubarak, and more specifically during the last decade of his regime, had low discursive power.

In conclusion, Mubarak's regime enjoyed a moderate institutional grip over state powers but suffered low discursive power. However, the questions remain: How did such moderate authoritarianism influence the regime's capacity to repress with impunity? And more crucially, is the latter a function of the former, as this research hypothesizes? How was the potential cause-and-effect transmitted?

their grievances, which were related to building churches and to appointments to public offices." Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 36

⁸⁹ In the aftermath of the rigged 2010 election, Shadi Hamid made the following prescient remark: "Egypt has in the past at last allowed the appearance of democracy, though not necessarily the substance...That opening is now gone...the regime has overreached. In opting to wipe out its opposition, and with such lack of subtlety, it has made a major and potentially debilitating miscalculation...The regime has lost whatever legitimacy it had left. More importantly, however, it has breathed new life into what was just one month ago an aimless, fractious opposition that couldn't agree on whether or not to boycott the elections... Meanwhile, Egypt will have a parliament but one with virtually no opposition...And with no one to fight, the NDP may very well end up fighting itself. Rather unwittingly, the ruling party has created the very political context most likely to tear it apart."

Shadi Hamid 'Egypt Election "Blunder" by Mubarak's NDP' *Brookings Doha Center*, December 10, 2010.

⁹⁰ Mark Beissinger, Amaney Jamal and Kevin Mazur "Who participates in democratic Revolutions? A comparison of the Egyptian and Tunisian Revolutions." *annual convention of the American Political Science Association*. August 2012.

3. Regime Consolidation and the Costs of Repression

Figure-3 below graphs the relationship between Egypt's level of consolidation and its political terror scores throughout Mubarak's 30-year rule. The dotted trend line depicts a linear and inverse relationship between the two variables, suggesting, generally but counter-intuitively and contradicting the research hypothesis, that increasing the level of authoritarianism is associated with a decrease in the state's political violence. When the relationship is plotted within a shorter period, the last decade of Mubarak's regime (2000-2010), the resulting graph in Figure-4 displays a shallower slope, which indicates that the relationship may be skewed by confounding factors.

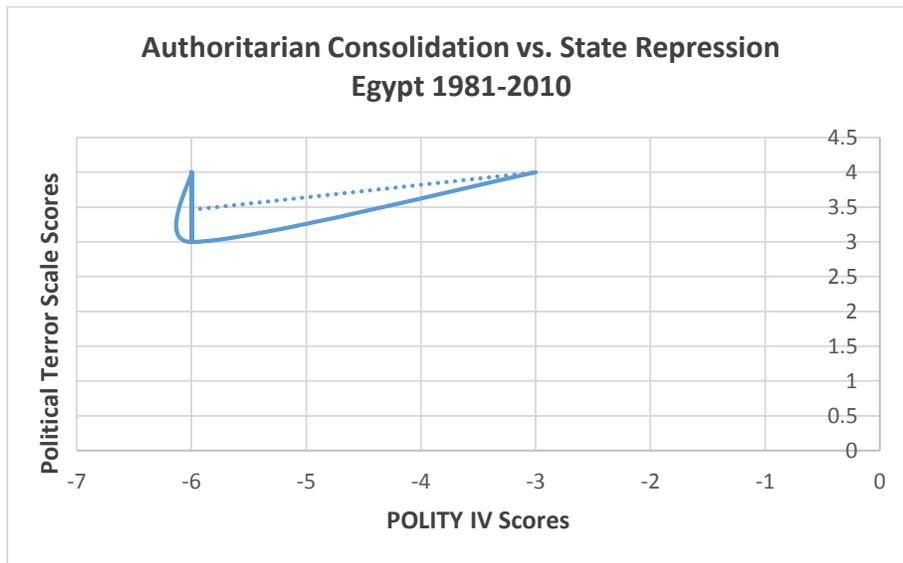


Figure 3: Egypt's POLITY IV and Political Terror Scores

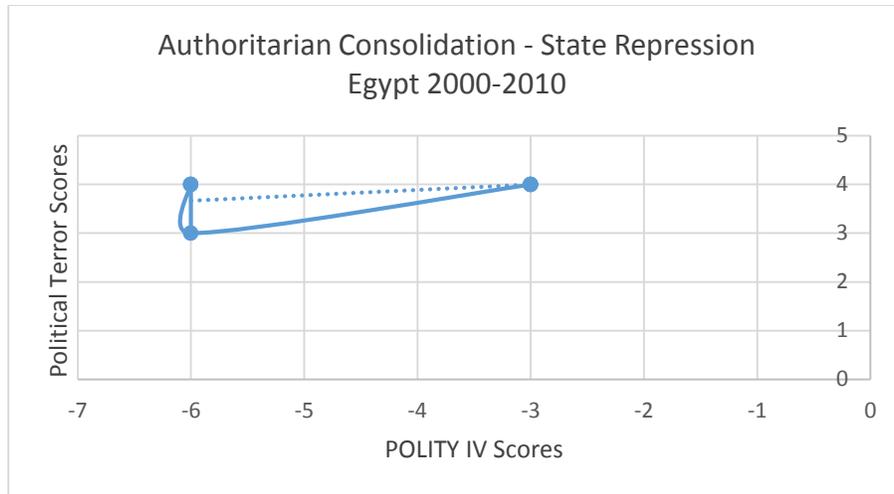


Figure-4: Egypt POLITY IV and Political Terror scores, 2000-2010

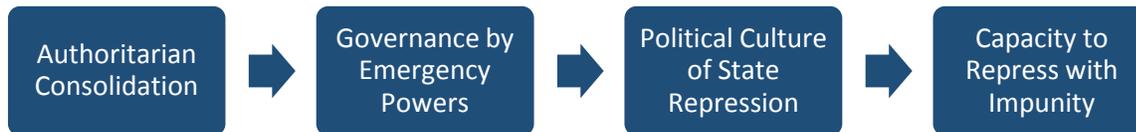
Throughout Mubarak’s term, state repression alternated between 3 and 4 points on the political terror scale (5 being the highest) without a corresponding change in the POLITY IV score, as this research hypothesized. Simply put, the regime was able to repress and afford the political costs of repression (not being overthrown or seriously challenged) without having to increase its authoritarian consolidation. There were potentially many factors that disrupted the hypothesized causal relationship between the variables. First, the Egyptian government had increased its violent repression in the late 1980s to mid-1990s in response to the terrorist attacks against the police and tourists perpetrated by the *Gama Islamiyah*. Therefore, it was the need to respond to security threats, rather than a quest to deepen the regime’s power grip, which induced such increased repression. Second, the levels of repression remained high despite the democratic reforms introduced in the mid-2000. This is to say that the decrease in levels of authoritarianism, which led to a change in Egypt’s POLITY IV score from -6 to -3 in 2005, did not induce a change in state repression as was postulated. This is perhaps due to the fact that the political openings or legislative amendments that permitted multi-candidate presidential elections were mere “window dressing”

and “all about image” as has been described by many scholars and observers.⁹¹ Essentially, the POLITY IV registered a change in Egypt’s authoritarian score based on *form* rather than on the *substance* of such democratic reforms, which skewed the relationship between the variables. Third, Egypt maintained its high levels of repression, particularly in the last decade, to suppress or contain the increase in labor protests and to silence political dissent in order to pave the road for Gamal’s succession plans. Fourth, and in the international arena, as the Bush Administration backtracked on its “Freedom Agenda” in the aftermath of Hamas winning the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, its criticism of Egypt’s repression grew muted. In other words, as the United States embraced its realist posture, Egypt realized it would not face serious diplomatic consequences for abrogating reforms and cracking down on Islamists given Mubarak’s government strategic importance and valuable role in the ‘war on terror’. In short, several confounding factors along with a flawed measurement by the POLITY IV index produced an erroneous graphical depiction of the relationship between the variables being considered. The descriptive analysis below attempts to demonstrate that the postulated causal process through which authoritarian consolidation influences the capacity of a regime to repress without incurring substantial consequences is

⁹¹ At close examination, the 2005 constitutional amendments placed formidable constraints to stand for presidential elections or establish a political party. For example, among these restrictions, a candidate must secure the political support of at least 250 elected officials from the lower and upper parliaments as well as provisional councils. This is a very difficult task to achieve given that the NDP often controls over 80% of seats in these assemblies. Also, the law governing political party formation had precluded the establishment of new parties whose political orientation were already represented and it had increased the required number of signatures of Egyptian citizens and had obliged applicants to detail their sources of funding. Steven Cook comments on the 2005 constitutional amendments that “All the talk of robust checks and balances could not hide the fact that Egypt’s political system was rigged in favor of a core constituency. Instead of changing that fact of Egyptian political life, the amendments sought to ensure the nondemocratic status quo under the guise of reform”. *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 191; Kristen Stilt also argues “Some appeared, in the abstract, to be democratic developments, however slight, and these were the ones that were highlighted for the international community. They served as “window dressing” in the sense that they helped distract from the authoritarian entrenchment accomplished by the amendments overall. Egyptians knew that they were not improvements given the larger political power structures...”

Kristen Stilt ‘Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes: The Egyptian Constitution of 1971’ in *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes*, Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, eds., pp. 111-140 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): p. 130

mediated through permanent governance by emergency powers and a political culture tolerant of state repression.



3.1 Permanent Governance by Emergency Powers

Consolidating its powers over state institutions and controlling the legislature empowered the regime to maintain a declared state of emergency throughout Mubarak’s term. This enabled the government wide discretionary use of its emergency authority and numerous exceptional measures that became permanent fixtures within Egyptian statecraft. In fact, the regime passed constitutional amendments that transformed some temporary powers granted by emergency laws into permanent ones and thus constitutionalizing its practices of repression into law.⁹² The endless character of emergency powers is not limited to temporality, but was also an “endlessness in the scope of emergency powers that have been established or exercised in Egypt, and endlessness in the list of targets against whom they are directed.”⁹³

⁹² Such as the introduction of article 179 in the constitutional amendment of March 2007, which broadened the definition of terrorism and most crucially “enshrine[d] what was technically a temporary (if ongoing) state of emergency as a permanent part of Egypt’s political structure and wall[ed] off security practices from constitutional oversight.” With this amendment, emergency powers became both permanent and beyond constitutional oversight. Nathan Brown, Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy ‘Egypt’s Controversial Constitutional Amendments’ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 23, 2007, p. 2

⁹³ Sadiq Reza ‘Endless Emergency: The Case of Egypt’ Boston University School of Law, *New Criminal Law Review*, Vol. 10 (2007): p. 535

Control over the judiciary shielded the regime from being legally accountable regarding its systematic use of violence and allowed the state to act beyond the legal framework. When a person is subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention without charges and trial, or torture, by the state's security or intelligence services, little can be done to seek redress for there are not many legal recourses against the state.⁹⁴ For example, Amnesty International reports show that about 10,000 people were held in detention across Egypt without charges or trials.⁹⁵ In effect, "emergency laws became a second constitution that regulates the state instead of the permanent constitution."⁹⁶

Dominance over coercive institutions not only secured the loyalty of their members to the regime, but also provided them with a legal basis to suppress dissent and repress opposition activities. Essentially, the regime granted the security apparatuses extensive and largely unchecked powers that immunized their personnel from prosecution. In fact, the state would often point to the law – emergency and anti-terror laws – to justify its "exceptional measures". To illustrate the extent to which the regime's *institutional power*, or its ability to uphold and exploit emergency powers, had expanded the state's capacity to employ repression without anticipating *ex post* punishment (i.e., affording the political costs of employing repression), it is worth quoting one scholarly report on Human Rights conditions in Egypt.

Under emergency powers given to the Interior Minister, tens of thousands of people were held without charge or any prospect of trial for months or years, often in defiance of repeated court orders for their release...Many were prisoners of conscience detained solely for their peacefully held views. ...Such was the confidence of police and other security forces that they could torture people without fear of punishment that in some instances they filmed videos of their crimes, which were later leaked on the Internet...The President was permanently given the power to bypass ordinary courts and refer security suspects to any judicial authority he

⁹⁴ As documented by several Human Rights Organizations, including reports from Human Rights Watch 2004, 2007

⁹⁵ 'Human Rights in Arab Republic of Egypt' *Amnesty International*, Report 2009

⁹⁶ Ahmad Thabit, *The Egyptian Democracy at the Dawn of the New Century* (Cairo, Egypt: Almahroosa Center for Publishing, 1999): p. 145 (Arabic)

chose, including military and emergency courts that have a long history of conducting unfair trials.⁹⁷

In short, emergency laws have removed checks and balances on the state's repressive behavior by creating "a parallel system that operated alongside the existing legal apparatus, but without institutional oversight"⁹⁸ thereby circumventing judicial due process and removing constitutional constraints creating a vacuum where "in effect the police and other agencies are free to use every form of abuse without restraint."⁹⁹ Philippe Droz-Vincent, a political scientist and author of *The Middle East: Authoritarian Regimes and Stalled Societies*, argues that the

prolonged state of emergency has criminalized public life... Generalized torture has been a hallmark of President Mubarak's regime. Military courts have tried numerous civilians. The Police force has been expanded for reasons ranging from safeguarding "public security" to protecting "public order".¹⁰⁰

3.2 A Political Culture Tolerant of State Repression

Keeping a permanent governance under emergency rule, along other exceptional measures, has sanctioned state repressive practices, normalized their widespread use by security forces and acculturated society to state violence.¹⁰¹ Political culture, preferably termed as informal institutions are "the unwritten rules and uncodified norms that, along with formal institutions – constitutions,

⁹⁷ 'Egypt Rises: Killings, Detentions and Torture in the '25 January Revolution' *Amnesty International*, May 2011, p.14-15

⁹⁸ Nathan J. Brown and Katie Bentivoglio 'Egypt's Resurgent Authoritarianism: It's a way of life' *Carnegie Center for International Peace*, October 9, 2014.

⁹⁹ Aida Saif El-Dawla 'Torture: a state policy' in *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, Rabab El Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, eds., pp. 120-135(New York: Zed Books, 2009): p. 124

¹⁰⁰ Philippe Droz-Vincent, *The Security Sector in Egypt*, p. 238

¹⁰¹ Khalil argues "Mubarak's ultimate crime will be treating his people with contempt – openly disrespecting them for so long that many Egyptians lost both respect for themselves and the sense that they could change anything that was happening around them...Egyptians were taught to "walk next to the wall" - translation: Keep your head down, feed your family, and don't stick your nose in affairs of governance that are above your station."

Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012): p. 21-22

laws, decrees, and regulations – provide incentives and disincentives for people as they navigate their daily lives. These informal institutions are not unique to Egypt; they exist everywhere.”¹⁰² and these “past practices and uncodified norms that developed since the Free Officers’ coup in 1952 serve as powerful incentives either to conform or remain politically demobilized.”¹⁰³ This culture of sanctioned state repression permeates the ranks and files of security institutions, adding to the pervasive perception of their impunity for acts of violence committed in the name of the state. Philip Marfleet, a scholar in Middle East studies, argues that “[t]he regime had become habituated to powers which were no longer exceptional measures but routine means of maintaining social control.”¹⁰⁴ Aida Saif El-Dawla, a psychiatrist and prominent human rights activist, observed that,

State Security became an authority in its own right, often boasting that it had become the highest authority in the land. For almost ten years police brutality spread uncontrolled, allowing perpetrators to believe that their behavior was approved of and encouraging others to emulate them.¹⁰⁵

When a state represses in the name of the law it institutionalizes such practices, it perpetuates a norm of impunity to its human rights violations and deepens the perception to the public at large – as well as to itself –¹⁰⁶ that the state can get away with political violence. Amnesty International reports on Egypt argue:

¹⁰² Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 192

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 193

¹⁰⁴ Philip Marfleet ‘State and Society’ in *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, Rabab El Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, eds., pp. 14-33 (New York: Zed Books, 2009): p. 24

¹⁰⁵ Aida Saif El-Dawla, *Torture: a state policy*, p. 131

¹⁰⁶ Khalil argues “With no real checks on their behavior, the internal culture of Egypt’s security forces deteriorated rapidly. Supported on paper by the Emergency Laws, and backed by the full power of all aspects of the government, the police devolved into Egypt’s largest and most heavily armed criminal mob. The entire relationship of the police to society changed and warped.”

Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square*, p. 26

Over the decades, these [emergency] powers and other restrictive laws and measures have led to entrenched patterns of serious human rights violations by the SSI [State Security Investigation] services and the police...The extensive use of administrative detention pervaded society and affected Egyptians from all walks of life...[it] has facilitated a wide range of other serious human rights violations, particularly routine torture and other ill-treatment of detainees..., all of which have been committed with virtual impunity.¹⁰⁷

The report further elaborates that this

Impunity for serious human rights violations...has led to the loss of trust in public institutions and the rule of law among ordinary Egyptians. In fact, many Egyptians viewed national institutions as obstacles to, rather than guarantors of, their enjoyment of human rights.¹⁰⁸

Scores of well-documented cases of police brutality including the public beating to death of Khalid Saeed and the graphic torture of Emad El Kabir and Mohammed Sharqawi, all attests to “widespread and systematic” human rights abuses and inadequate accountability to perpetrators.¹⁰⁹ This culture of impunity pervades to this day as illustrated by the acquittal of top officials, including Mubarak, and his Minister of Interior down to the policemen charged with killing protesters during the January 25th uprising.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Egypt Rises’ *Amnesty International*, May 2011, p.14-15

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, p. 97

¹⁰⁹ ‘Egypt: Protection of torture victim is key for justice to be done’ *Amnesty International*, Public Statement, January 10, 2007.

4. Consolidation, Repression and Causation: Insights from Rabaa Dispersal

To infer causality, one must establish that consolidation preceded repression. This is however a difficult task to accomplish given the fact that both processes were ongoing not only during Mubarak's tenure, but since the Free Officers came to power in 1952. Interestingly, the behavior of the military-backed interim government following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and the ensuing repression offers a useful example on how the processes of consolidation and repression were sequenced.

On August 14, 2013, the interim government launched a military operation to disperse a large pro-Morsi sit-in at Rabaa Square. Within 12 hours, as the Human Rights Watch's year-long investigation report later found, the military and security forces had killed over 1,000 protesters in a "systematic, methodical, and premeditated" attack, and virtually perpetrated the "world largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history."¹¹⁰ Following the calculated use of force against protesters, the government denied any wrongdoing and has neither launched a fact-finding investigation nor charged any official or policemen for the mass killings. How could the regime afford the political costs of committing such massacre?

It is important to realize that this mass repression was *preceded* by the consolidation of both institutional and discursive powers into the hands of the interim government. Once Morsi was dislodged from power following a mass uprising, the constitution was suspended and the military-backed regime assumed full legislative and executive authority; thus consolidating its institutional power over all state institutions.

¹¹⁰ 'All according to Plan: The Rabaa Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt' *Human Right Watch*, August 12, 2014.

In terms of discursive power, the military takeover was immediately followed by an intense state-led media campaign to demonize and delegitimize the Muslim Brotherhood by portraying them as “traitors to the national cause” coupled with a rise in hyper-nationalist and anti-Islamist ideology.¹¹¹ The dissemination of the narrative that the country needed a strongman who would bring stability to Egypt,¹¹² proceeded with a cult of personality and a sense of nationwide Sisi mania and hagiography.¹¹³ Prior to the massacre, Sisi requested a “mandate” from the people to confront “violence and potential terrorism”,¹¹⁴ thus gaining substantial public support and absolving his regime for its subsequent violence. In fact, prior to the military takeover, an estimated 54% supported the ouster of Morsi and 73% described the military influence as positive.¹¹⁵ Religious leaders appeared alongside then General Sisi in a televised conference immediately after the military coup and later issued fatwas (religious edicts) to promote submission to the state and justify its actions.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the government amassed considerable popularity as the narrative of fighting the “Muslim Brotherhood’s terror” and the nationalist rhetoric of “averting civil war and restoring the state”¹¹⁷ spread. Said narrative served to rally people round the flag and became so pervasive that it helped gain sizable public support for the government’s violent repression.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Taufic Rahim ‘Is Hypernationalism the new Islamism’ *Almonitor*, August 23, 2013.

¹¹² Joshua Stacher ‘Can a Myth Rule a Nation?’ *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2014

¹¹³ Juan Cole ‘Egypt’s New Cult of Personality: The Beautification of Saint Gen. al-Sisi’ *Informed Comment Blog*, April 1, 2014.

¹¹⁴ ‘Egyptian Army Chief Calls for Street Protests’ *BBC News*, July 24, 2013.

¹¹⁵ “One Year after Morsi’s Ouster, Divides Persist on El Sisi, Muslim Brotherhood” *Pew Research*, May 22, 2014.

¹¹⁶ Jared Malsin ‘Turmoil at Al Azhar: Religion, Politics and the Egyptian State’ *The Revealer: a Review of Religion and Media*, April 8, 2014.

¹¹⁷ Emad El Din Shahin ‘Lesson Not Learned: Trading Democracy for ‘Neoliberal Militarism’ in Egypt’ *Aljazeera Center for Studies*, September 04, 2014.

¹¹⁸ Shadi Hamid, a fellow at the Brookings Institutions and author of temptation of power comments on Rabaa massacre that there were “Egyptians supporting the mass killing of their fellow countrymen in a way that was really unprecedented in modern Egyptian history. That’s a very difficult thing for a country to confront” Quoted in Alice Speri ‘Egypt’s Rabaa Massacre of 1,000 Morsi Supporters Went ‘According to Plan’ *Vice News*, August 12, 2014.

It is not surprising that in the midst of Rabaa dispersal, a high ranking officer in the security forces was videotaped on a cell phone thanking his surrounding subordinates for their brutal crackdown of protesters and promising that the police

Would not retreat, or fear, and whoever comes near us, *shoot them at the heart* [Repeated twice]. These are clear instructions, tell them that the Assistant Minister [of Interior] and the director of [Central] Security said that. What happened before will not happen again, don't worry, no one will be able to confront us."¹¹⁹

In fact, since Morsi's removal from power, Egypt has witnessed the most intense political violence in its modern political history. The ideological basis underlying Sisi government's repression is unmistakable, as Amr Adly, a non-resident scholar at Carnegie Center, argues,

Egypt has been witnessing a tidal wave of conservative nationalism since June 30 [2013]... Both crisis and conspiracy have been integral components of conservative nationalism...Crisis-based discourse provides the government with a good justification to lower expectations in general and to project an image of stability against the backdrop of regional tumult. The conspiracy discourse is also instrumental in justifying the suppressive measures that the state (particularly its coercive apparatus) has taken against the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other opponents and the effective preclusion of the political opening that initially started with the January 25 Revolution in 2011."¹²⁰

From an ideological perspective, it is worth asking why the government was able to suppress the Rabaa protests but not the January 25th uprising. Cook argues that the

narrative of Tahrir was that it was a popular, peaceful coming together of all Egyptians to rid themselves of an autocratic leader who through graft, corruption, and violence had done great harm to the country... Rabaa was depicted as a disruptive, non-Egyptian, democracy defying, violence/terrorism driven

¹¹⁹ Instructions of Lt. General to shoot at the heart, accessed on October 25, 2014. (Arabic)
Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbHX6cM_nIs

¹²⁰ Amr Adly 'Egypt's Conservative Nationalism: Discourse and Praxis of the New Regime' *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 14, 2014.

premeditated event ...It became acceptable to kill large numbers of people in the name of a revolution that Egypt's leadership does not and never did believe in.¹²¹

5. Findings and Conclusions

This chapter sought to investigate the proposition that as *authoritarian consolidation increases, the regime's political costs associated with employing repression decrease*. The underlying assumption is that regimes with different degrees of authoritarianism can repress with impunity at different levels. Graphical depiction of the measures of authoritarianism and state repression have yielded inconclusive results due to confounding factors and flawed measures by the POLITY IV index. In addition, changes on both scores (authoritarianism and repression) throughout Mubarak's term were not dramatic enough to capture subtle distinctions and identify consistent patterns between the variables. A descriptive analysis found that regime consolidation empowers the incumbent to employ the power of the law to repress with little accountability. Simply put, *the greater the regime dominance over state institutions and branches of government, the greater its capacity to uphold and exploit emergency authority, exceptional measures and arbitrary use of police powers to commit political violence in the name of national security*. Regime elites use their patronage, election fraud and intimidation to win in the ballot box and maintain their hold on power, which then enables them to pass laws that legitimize their repression against their opponents.¹²² Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest, in this case and based on neo-institutionalist perspectives, that autocratic consolidation has *some* influence over a regime's capacity to afford the political costs of state repression. This finding corroborates the views

¹²¹ Steven A. Cook 'Revisiting Rabaa' *Council on Foreign Relations*, September, 19, 2014

¹²² Steven A. Cook argues "That Egypt boasted two houses of parliament and held regularly scheduled elections did not diminish the fact that Egypt was a police state in which "rule by law" rather than "rule of law" prevailed". Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 184

expressed in the existing literature.¹²³ However, this research cannot make a strong causal claim, and hence it is necessary to limit the finding for several reasons.

First, it is difficult to empirically estimate the independent impact of regime consolidation on state repression due to the thorny endogeneity problem since researchers cannot ‘cleanly’ disentangle and adequately assess the causal force of one over the other. In addition, given the feedback loop and self-reinforcing mechanism in much of social life, not only consolidation affects repression, but also a regime’s capacity to repress without *ex post* punishment can strengthen its grip over state power. Inverse causality remains a persistent problem in studying institutions and the outcomes of their actions.

Secondly, in addition to autocratic consolidation, there were a number of factors at work in the Egyptian case that shaped state repression. This included the government’s response to an Islamist insurgency, attempts to suppress labor protests due to the deteriorating socio-economic conditions, its quest to silence critics to Gamal’s presidential ambitions and the anticipation of low punitive measures from regional and international allies. One, therefore, must be cautious in assessing the explanatory power or the causal force of any single variable.

Thirdly, while authoritarian consolidation clearly *preceded* state repression in the case of the post-Morsi regime and its massacre at Rabaa, the government was likely, as well as able, to repress protesters with a similarly brutal crackdown immediately after the military coup given the momentum of widespread revolutionary fervor and anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments. Essentially, nationwide hostility against Morsi’s government, among other factors, was also at

¹²³ Davenport employed Large-N analysis, in which he found some evidence to indicate that increasing authoritarianism increases state repression.
Christian Davenport ‘Human Rights and the Democratic Proposition’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 92-116 (February, 1999): p.97

work. Therefore, while the sequence between the variables can be established, it is still not sufficient to establish strong causal claim with certainty.

Having established that the Mubarak regime was moderately authoritarian and that consolidation has some effect on repression, the next chapter explores how the regime's political costs of state repression; i.e., the extent to which the regime can repress with impunity, shaped the government's conflict behavior at the onset of contentious collective action.

Chapter 6

Contentious Collective Action and State Policy Response

The central claim advanced in this research is that state policy response to contentious collective action is influenced by the political costs of its state repression. Essentially, reiterating hypothesis 2, the lower the costs of state repression, the more likely the ruling regime will employ violent repression rather than engage in bargaining and accommodative strategies. This study hypothesizes that the government will continue to employ violence against challengers as long as the political costs incurred from employing such violence are lower than the costs of offering policy concessions. As presented in the preceding chapter, this research hypothesized that Egypt would respond as a moderately authoritarian regime, with modest levels of repression and that it would offer policy concessions at the onset of organized dissent as opposed to retaliating using large-scale violence as in highly authoritarian regimes.

This chapter will disaggregate the 18-day uprising into several crises, each spanning a period of two days (i.e., $n = 9$) and analyze the mass contention vs. state policy response to test the above-mentioned hypothesis.¹ The chapter divides the uprising into three parts. The first examines how the government vacillated between concession and repression throughout the uprising and maps its pattern in order to gain an insight on government crisis policy decisions and potentially identify the point of maximum repression; i.e.; when repression reached its *prohibitive threshold*. By studying the patterns of government policy choices, the study attempts to infer the influence of state repression in the crisis decision calculus. The second, a closer look at regime insider's

¹ Breaking up the uprising into 9 sets of 2-day crisis proved to be an appropriate framework in capturing the action-reaction dynamics and facilitating the case analysis. During each crisis, it was observed that the government would often delay its response to the next day, and hence, analyzing the crisis day-by-day would not adequately reflect the contention-policy sequence and pattern.

statements and testimonies, will help reveal the motives behind Mubarak and his top aides' crisis decisions. Finally, the last part synthesizes and analyzes the findings.

1. State Concession-Repression Pattern

It is important to briefly describe the pre-crisis stage. A number of events preceded the crisis. The convergence of these events had set Egyptians for a showdown with their government. Cumulatively, these antecedent incidents created conditions propitious for the mass eruption of anti-government unrest. First, the blatant rigging of the national legislative elections in November 2010, which had given the ruling party 97 per cent of the seats and had outraged and alienated large segments of society across the political spectrum. In fact, the forged elections motivated the otherwise divided political opposition to coalesce into a unified front against the regime. By blocking the route of *evolutionary* political reform and backtracking on democratic gains, the regime unwittingly forced the populace to attempt to affect change through *revolutionary* means. Second, the New Year's Eve church bombing in Alexandria, and the suspicious circumstances surrounding the incident that led the government itself to suspect police involvement and launch an investigation, soured the relations between the Coptic community and security forces and served to further rouse an already agitated Egyptian street.² Third, and most importantly, the sudden departure of Ben Ali from Tunis on January 14, following weeks of popular protests, took

² 'Ex-Minister suspected behind Alex church bombing' *Al Arabiya News*, February 7, 2011.

the world by surprise and inspired Egyptians to carry out their own protests.³ During this period, at least four Egyptians set themselves on fire to imitate Mohamad Bouaziz's self-immolation.⁴

Using social media outlets, multiple activist groups including *Kefaya*, *Tadamon*, *April 6*, and '*We are all Khaled Saeed*' called for a public protest on January 25, which coincided with a national holiday commemorating the police forces. The media labeled it the "Day of Rage" and as it drew closer, several pockets of protests occurred throughout the country. Fear of a government crackdown led the bulk of the political opposition to declare in advance that they would not participate in the protests. These included the Muslim Brotherhood who issued strong warnings stating that joining the protests would result in expulsion from the organization and the Salafist leaders whose interpretation of Islamic law proscribes revolutions as *fitna* (sedition). The Sufis remained detached and the religious institutions such as Al Azhar and the Coptic Church continued to support the regime and refused to sanction the demonstrations.⁵ In this chapter, multiple sources provided the information on the crisis events and the respective state responses.⁶ The number of people killed during the crisis provides the measure of state repression.⁷ The study uses a nominal scale (see Appendix A) to measure policy concession.

³ Khalil describes that moment: "the sight of Tunisian driving the similarly entrenched Ben Ali from power had seemingly unblocked something in the psyches of protesters. Now that they knew it was possible, people couldn't wait to get on with their own liberation." Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square*, p. 145

⁴ Dina Zayed 'Egyptians set themselves ablaze after Tunisia unrest' *Reuters*, January 18, 2011

⁵ Sherine El Ghatit 'Revolution Without Islamists?' in *Egypt's Tahrir Revolution*, p. 113-114

⁶ These include the following sources:

'Summary of Final Report: Fact-Finding National Commission About the January 25, 2011 Revolution' (Arabic) released and published by the Egyptian government; 'Timeline: Egypt's Revolution' *Aljazeera English*; 'Timeline: Revolution in Egypt' *Los Angeles Times*; 'Egypt Revolution 2011: A Complete Guide to the Unrest' *Huffington Post*; 'Protests in Egypt and Unrest in Middle East – as it happened' *The Guardian*; 'Timeline: Egypt's Political Transition' *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*; 'Timeline: Egypt's year of revolution' *ahram online*.

⁷ Ideally, state repression should be measured by looking at the physical integrity rights' violations; i.e., the number of people killed, injured, detained and tortured by the state security forces during each crisis set; i.e., *during each two days during the uprising*. Unfortunately, no data exists that specifically documents the injured, detained and tortured on a *daily basis* and this is partly due to the chaos and collapse of police forces during the January 25th uprising. Data from the Egyptian government and Human Rights Organizations only show the total numbers during

Crisis 1: January 25-26

Thousands of protesters took to the streets across Egypt shouting slogans such as “bread, freedom, social justice.” In Cairo, a large number of people converged in the center of the city, overwhelmed police barricades and marched toward Tahrir Square, the Interior Ministry and State TV among scores of other public buildings, demanding the government to raise wages, stop police brutality and dismiss the unpopular Minister of Interior, end the emergency law and place limits on presidential terms. The MPs who lost their seats in the 2010 fraudulent elections gathered in front of the Supreme Court shouting “null and void”. When some demonstrators began to clash with the police, others stressed their non-violent nature of the protest shouting “peaceful, peaceful”. By late January, the mass protests spread to many parts of the country as the Muslim Brotherhood gave their support to the demonstrations.

The State’s Response

The police initially showed unusual restraint before issuing several warnings to end the demonstrations. When protesters broke through the heavy cordons, police forces responded by using batons, tear gas, water

Repression	
Killed	7
Concessions	
NIL	

cannons, and rubber bullets, engaging in running battles against protesters. By midnight, they were able to disperse many of the demonstrations, including the one in Tahrir Square. The government reduced cell phone coverage and internet service and by January 26, it launched a media offensive that dismissed protesters’ demands, accused the Brotherhood of staging the demonstration to

the 18-day period. In terms of the number of people killed on a daily basis, the only data found that has modest reliability (given that their total numbers are very close to official numbers and that they list the full names, location and date of death) is provided by the ‘Wiki Thawra: Statistical Data Base for the Egyptian Revolution’. Therefore, state repression will be measured by the number of protesters killed during each set of crisis.

destabilize the country and warned the populace against joining unlawful gatherings that threatened public security. Repression was the hallmark of the state’s response.

Crisis 2: January 27-28

Demonstrations and clashes with the police continued across several cities. A number of public buildings were set on fire and the security forces seemed determined to show force in anticipation of larger crowds the next day. On January 28, known now as the *Friday of Rage*, hundreds of thousands came to the streets after prayer. In Cairo, people marched downtown, and mobs set a number of regime symbols ablaze including the NDP headquarters and dozens of police stations, which allowed many prisoners to escape. This day marked the pivotal showdown where the civil unrest transformed into a revolutionary stance perhaps best embodied by the battle over Kasr Al Nil Bridge in which hordes of riot police failed to stop demonstrators from pouring into Tahrir square. Furthermore, there were widespread reports of arson, looting and vandalism and a breakdown in order as the police forces were overwhelmed and exhausted in running battles with the large number of protesters. The police collapsed and retreated.⁸

The State’s Response

On Thursday, January 27, top government officials met to discuss crisis management and the idea of dissolving the cabinet was rejected and no

Repression	
Killed	579

Concessions	
NIL	

⁸ Walid describes that day that “the regime’s forces were exhausted, demoralized and out of ammunition and tear gas. Officers on the spot could not communicate with their headquarters due to depletion of the batteries in their handsets. The security forces retreated and then dispersed in disarray.”
Walid Kazziha, *Egypt Under Mubarak: A Family Affair*, p. 45

concessions were offered to calm the protesters.⁹ After the meeting, Safwat El Sherif, the Secretary-General of the NDP, gave the government's first press conference where he acknowledged the economic problems, dismissed rumors that top regime officials have fled the country and stressed the government's continued economic and political reforms.¹⁰

On January 28, and in anticipation of gatherings after prayers, the government shut off Internet and cell phone coverage. This day marked the climax of the government's repression, with approximately 570 reportedly killed and a large number of people detained, including leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. By 4 pm, when police forces collapsed, Mubarak imposed martial law, deployed the army to the streets and placed a curfew from 6 pm – 7 am.

Crisis 3: January 29-30

Protesters violated the curfew and continued to descend to major squares. When the military deployed its units across major cities to protect critical infrastructures in the ensuing security vacuum, people on the streets greeted the soldiers chanting, "The army and the people are one hand". By this time, Tahrir Square had become the center of protest activities and several youth movements demanded that Mubarak step down and supported ElBaradei to negotiate the establishment of a transitional government until the next presidential elections. By now, Al Jazeera channel had been playing a galvanizing role in the protests and challenged the State TV's pro-regime narrative.

⁹ Abdel Latif El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak*, p. 91

¹⁰ 'Press Conference by Safwat Al Sharif' January 27, 2011 (Arabic)
Available from: http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=LOYh0Zm_yxQ

The State's Response

Shortly after midnight, Mubarak made his first televised address, in which he acknowledged that the “protests came to express the legitimate expectations for more speed in halting unemployment and enhancing living conditions.” He pledged to “continue political, economic and social reforms for the sake of a free and democratic Egyptian community” and offered his first concession by asking “the government to present its resignation today and...name a new government starting from tomorrow.”¹¹ Although the speech did not fulfill the expectations of protesters, Ahmed Shafiq, a Mubarak loyalist, was named to form the new government and concessions included the replacement of a number of ministers including the unpopular Interior Minister Al Adly, as well businessmen who were close to Gamal. The regime appointed Omar Suleiman vice president, ending speculation that Gamal would become president. Also, Ahmed Ezz, a publicly reviled senior NDP official and the mastermind of the 2010 elections, stepped down. The regime sought to muzzle anti-regime media by revoking Aljazeera’s broadcast license, shutting down its office, and by allowing pro-regime goons to assault journalists.

Repression	
Killed	146

Concessions	
Dismissed gov.	
Appointed VP	
Some NDP officials resign	

Crisis 4: January 31, February 1

Unrest continued nationwide and protesters, unhappy with the changes in the new cabinet, accused the government of not being serious about reforms and again demanded that Mubarak resign and, after having called for a ‘million man march’ on the streets of Cairo, announced that the following Friday would be the “Friday of Departure”. The military issued its first public

¹¹ Mubarak’s first speech, January 29, 2011. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DtOr6BBOHg>

communiqué, declaring: “Your armed forces, who are aware of the legitimacy of your demands and are keen to assume their responsibility in protecting the nation and the citizens, affirms that freedom of expression through peaceful means is guaranteed to everybody...The armed forces have not and will not resort to the use of force against this great people.”¹²

This statement caught the palace by surprise as it publicly declared the military’s stance on the crisis. As Ashraf Khalil put it, “In the minds of the most optimistic protesters, the military had just received their Tiananmen orders and refused to carry them out.”¹³ This position is where the first signs of weakening within the regime’s coalition appeared, and they served to shift the balance of power against Mubarak. Since the armed forces remained the dominant institution and was in control of the country’s streets, the communiqué unequivocally signaled the military’s support of peaceful protests to affect reforms, thereby stimulating the momentum of civil unrest. By now most tourists have fled the country, investors were withdrawing significant investment capital and Egypt was brought to a standstill by the numerous demonstrations and strikes erupting across the country.

The State’s Response

The government began blocking Aljazeera’s broadcast signal and organized its own protests in support of national stability and loyalty to Mubarak. The state media gave undue attention to the pro-Mubarak demonstrations, depicting them as popular and as ubiquitous as those of the anti-regime protests. On February 1, Mubarak gave his second televised speech, in which he

Repression	
Killed	21
Concessions	
Mubarak not to stand for re-election	
Pledged constitutional reforms	

¹² ‘UPDATE 1-Egypt Army: will not use violence against citizens’ *Reuters*, January 31, 2011.

¹³ Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square*, p. 211

pledged not to stand for reelection. He stated that he would like to finish his term “to ensure a peaceful transfer of power”, and entrusted “the new government to perform in ways that will achieve the legitimate rights of the people” and assigned “the vice president with the task of holding dialogue with all the political forces”. He ended his speech with an emotional appeal, “this dear nation is my country... here I have lived and fought for its sake and I defended its land, its sovereignty and interests and on this land I will die.”¹⁴ The speech was an effective tool that employed an emotional framing and evoked sympathy for Mubarak. It allegedly led many parents to go to the streets and ask their children to stop protesting to give the president a chance at reform. The regime breathed a sigh of relief since it seemed at the time, that they would overcome the crisis.

Crisis 5: February 2-3

After the president’s emotional speech, the regime regained some momentum. Some protesters left in favor of giving the government a chance to accomplish the promised constitutional and economic reforms while its forces and thugs, in turn, launched renewed attacks against demonstrators. The army had to intervene to stop the fighting between the two sides. Opposition forces, including ElBaradei and the Muslim Brotherhood, declared that they would not join in the national dialogue spearheaded by Omar Suleiman until Mubarak stepped down.

¹⁴ ‘Hosni Mubarak’s Speech: Full Text’ *The Guardian*, February 1, 2011

The State's Response

On February 2nd, the NDP started mobilizing supporters and, in a show of renewed force, they went on the offensive: a number of provocateurs on camels and horses emerged from the pro-Mubarak crowds, passed all military checkpoints, and attacked the anti-regime protesters in Central Cairo using whips, stones and knives in what came to be known as the “Battle of the Camel”. In addition, thugs, widely believed to be associated with the

Repression	
Killed	21

Concessions	
Gamal not to run for president	
VP begins national dialogue	
Travel ban & asset freeze of unpopular NDP officials	
Partial restoration of communication	

Ministry of Interior, threw petrol bombs from bridges and buildings onto protesters. Prime Minister Shafiq issued an apology, denied reports that the assault was the work of the government and promised to investigate the incident. Omar Suleiman began a national dialogue with members of the opposition, but most were suspicious of him for being part of the regime and too close to Mubarak; for being known for his persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood and for his involvement in Egypt's unpopular foreign policy measures. In a televised interview, Omar Suleiman reiterated Mubarak's promises that he, and his son Gamal, would not run for president. The Prosecutor General imposed travel bans and asset freezes on several NDP officials, including Ahmed Ezz, while the government restored partial Internet access, mobile coverage, and also eased nighttime curfew. State media promoted the dissemination of information that had ultra-nationalist and xenophobic overtones claiming that the uprising was a foreign conspiracy aimed at destabilizing Egypt.

Crisis 6: February 4-5

The “too little too late concessions” and the brutality of pro-regime thugs in the battle of the Camel reversed the public sympathy generated by Mubarak’s speech and eroded the support of some government members.¹⁵ The protesters organized into committees that managed all protests’ activities including setting up checkpoints, makeshift clinics, appearing on international media outlets, distributing food and blankets, and cleaning up the garbage. There were public figures that came and talked to the protesters in Tahrir Square, including Defense Minister Tantawi and the Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Mosa. Such visits lent moral support and gave yet another signal of the Military’s implicit acceptance of the peaceful protests. By now, the protests had garnered self-sustaining momentum and February 4, the *Friday of Departure*, saw the growth of both the number of demonstrators and popular demands that Mubarak immediately step down. By February 5, protesters from other parts of the country came to join and camp in Tahrir square in solidarity.

The State’s Response

Omar Suleiman continued to conduct national dialogues with a number of representatives of the opposition attempting to find a way out of the crisis. The regime rejected popular demands to annul the 2010 elections and dissolve the parliament. However, the NDP announced changes in the party’s leadership, which included the resignation of top officials such as Gamal Mubarak and the appointment of Hossam Badrawi as its new Secretary General. This news provided yet another

Repression	
Killed	4
Concessions	
Other NDP officials resign, including Gamal	
Former Interior Minister & top aides under house arrest	

¹⁵ El-Menawi argued that in the aftermath of the Battle of the Camel “It seemed clear that, nationally, the public had swung behind calls for Mubarak to step down, either completely, or by transferring all his authority to his Vice President.” *Tahrir: The Last 18 days of Mubarak*, p. 230

signal confirming the previous announcement that Gamal would not run for president. Furthermore, the public prosecutor placed the former Minister of the Interior and his top assistants under house arrest, pending criminal investigation.

Crisis 7: February 6-7

The regime lost the battle in the local and international media as the media covered the protests in Tahrir Square live and broadcasted the events across the globe. February 6 was dubbed the ‘Sunday of Martyrs’ as demonstrators vowed to continue protesting until Mubarak resigned. Muslim prayers, Christian mass, and funerals were held in Tahrir Square as well as in other major public squares. On February 7, the state-run *Al Ahrām* newspaper switched sides and supported the uprising, a clear sign that not only the military establishment, but also part of the regime’s civilian coalition had defected due to major shifts in popular opinion.

The State’s Response

On February 6, state security released *Wael Ghonim* from prison. Ghonim, an activist and Google regional manager, was freed after an 11-day arrest to appease protesters. The government also approved a 15 percent raise in salaries and pensions. In addition, Omar Suleiman held talks with opposition forces, including representatives from the Muslim Brotherhood and agreed on a roadmap for constitutional reforms, but he refused the demands for Mubarak to step down.

Repression	
Killed	4
Concessions	
Created committees for constitutional reforms	
VP met opposition leaders, including MB	
Released Wael Ghonim	
Approved 15% salary raise	

Crisis 8: February 8-9

Again the protests gained momentum as labor unions, academics, and celebrities threw in their lot and joined the demonstrations, which by then had become part of the daily routine that turned Tahrir Square and other public places in major cities into carnivals. Protesters placed a number of government buildings under siege, including the Council of Ministers and Houses of Parliament. Paralysis gripped the country due to the massive strikes and people plastered public buildings with signs that read “closed until the regime falls”.

The State’s Response

Hossam Badrawi, the newly appointed Secretary General of the NDP, announced that Mubarak would step down soon, to be later contradicted by both the Prime Minister and the Information Minister. The government announced the release of hundreds of political prisoners. Omar Suleiman declared the formation of committees tasked to carry out the necessary political and constitutional reforms, and warned that there could be a coup if protesters refused to compromise and allow the return to normalcy.¹⁶

Repression	
Killed	8

Concessions	
Released hundreds of political prisoners	
Announced constitutional reforms	

¹⁶ ‘Egypt Protesters defiant as Omar Suleiman warns of coup’ *The Guardian*, February 9, 2011

Crisis 9: February 10-11

Protests, strikes and sit-ins were spiraling out of control and reaching a boiling point and some of the protesters began marching to one of Mubarak's official residences. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) held a meeting, the first without its chairman President Mubarak, and broadcasted a statement on national TV, declaring that it would remain in session. The statement essentially reiterated its support of the legitimate demands of protesters and stated that "conditions are now appropriate to facilitate the democratic process" and that it would "consider procedures and measures that may be taken to protect the nation."¹⁷ This was a signal that the military was growing impatient with how the government had been handling the crisis and that it sought to narrow the options for the president who was scheduled to deliver his third, and final, televised speech that night. Rumors abounded that Mubarak would step down but, when the speech did not deliver what was widely expected, Hossam Badrawi resigned in protest.

The State's Response

Mubarak delivered his third and final speech, stating that he was transferring most of his powers to his Vice President, but refused to resign.

Protesters were enraged, shouted 'leave' and hurled shoes and sandals at the projection of the broadcast. The popular rejection of Mubarak's speech

spoke of the possibility of a nationwide insurrection and the continued descent into domestic turmoil thus prompting the military to step in and force Mubarak out of power. On midday February 11, Mubarak left to Sharm Al Shaikh before protesters besieged the presidential palace

Repression	
Killed	13
Concessions	
Mubarak steps down	
SCAF pledges to dismiss government	
SCAF pledges to dissolve parliaments	

¹⁷ 'Egypt's Supreme Council of Armed Forces: Statements and Key Leaders' *The New York Times*, February 14, 2011

and finally, at 18:00 local time, bowing down to the protesters' demands, Omar Suleiman announced the resignation of Mubarak and the handover of power to the military. A few days thereafter, the SCAF sacked the cabinet, suspended the constitution and dissolved the legislature.

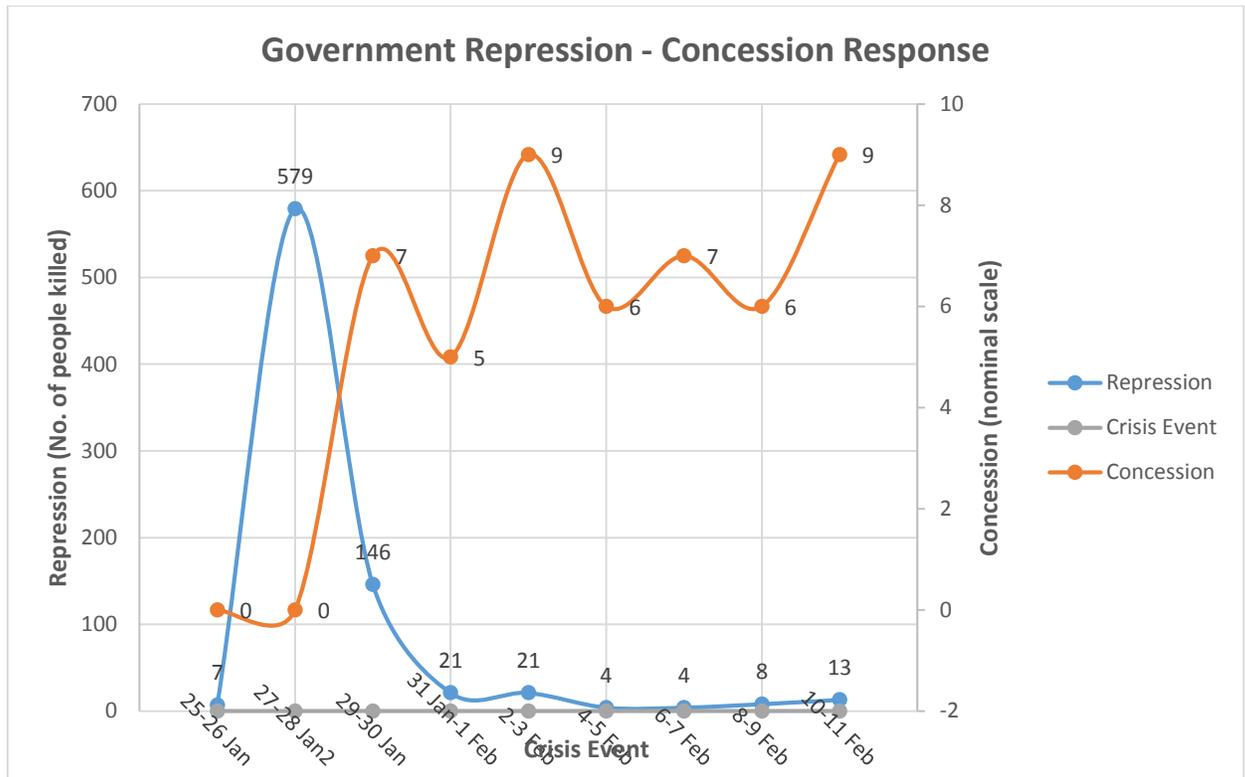


Figure 5: Government Repression-Concession Response

As the figure shows, Egypt's response to the protests can be divided in three phases. The first phase (January 25-28) was marked by the employment of escalating repression and the absence of concessions. January 28th was the bloodiest day of the uprisings, which was immediately followed by Mubarak's first speech and conciliatory strategies. It is however unclear whether or not this day marked the regime's having reached a prohibitive threshold of repression (i.e., it could not repress with the same intensity anymore and hence had to begin offering concessions) as the research hypothesis suggests, or if alternatively and quite plausibly, the regime began to compromise due to the collapse of the police forces and the refusal of the deployed

military to shoot at citizens to save the regime. However, as Skocpol and others had argued, revolutions only occur when the state loses its capacity to repress its challengers, i.e., when the populace overwhelms, defeats or neutralizes state's coercive institutions.¹⁸

In the second phase between January 29 and February 3, the regime began decreasing its repressive tactics and offered minor concessions. During this phase, Mubarak loyalists launched the 'Battle of the Camel' which resulted in a 'blowback' that provoked public backlash, dissipated the sympathy gained by Mubarak's second speech, bolstered the protesters' resolve and shifted domestic (and international) opinion against the regime, and thus forcing the government to offer higher-cost concessions in its quest to end the protests and maintain its position in power. Therefore, in the third phase from February 4th to the 11th, the level of repression had significantly diminished and the concessions were more forthcoming, albeit belatedly, to satisfy the protesters' expectations.

¹⁸ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): p. 285

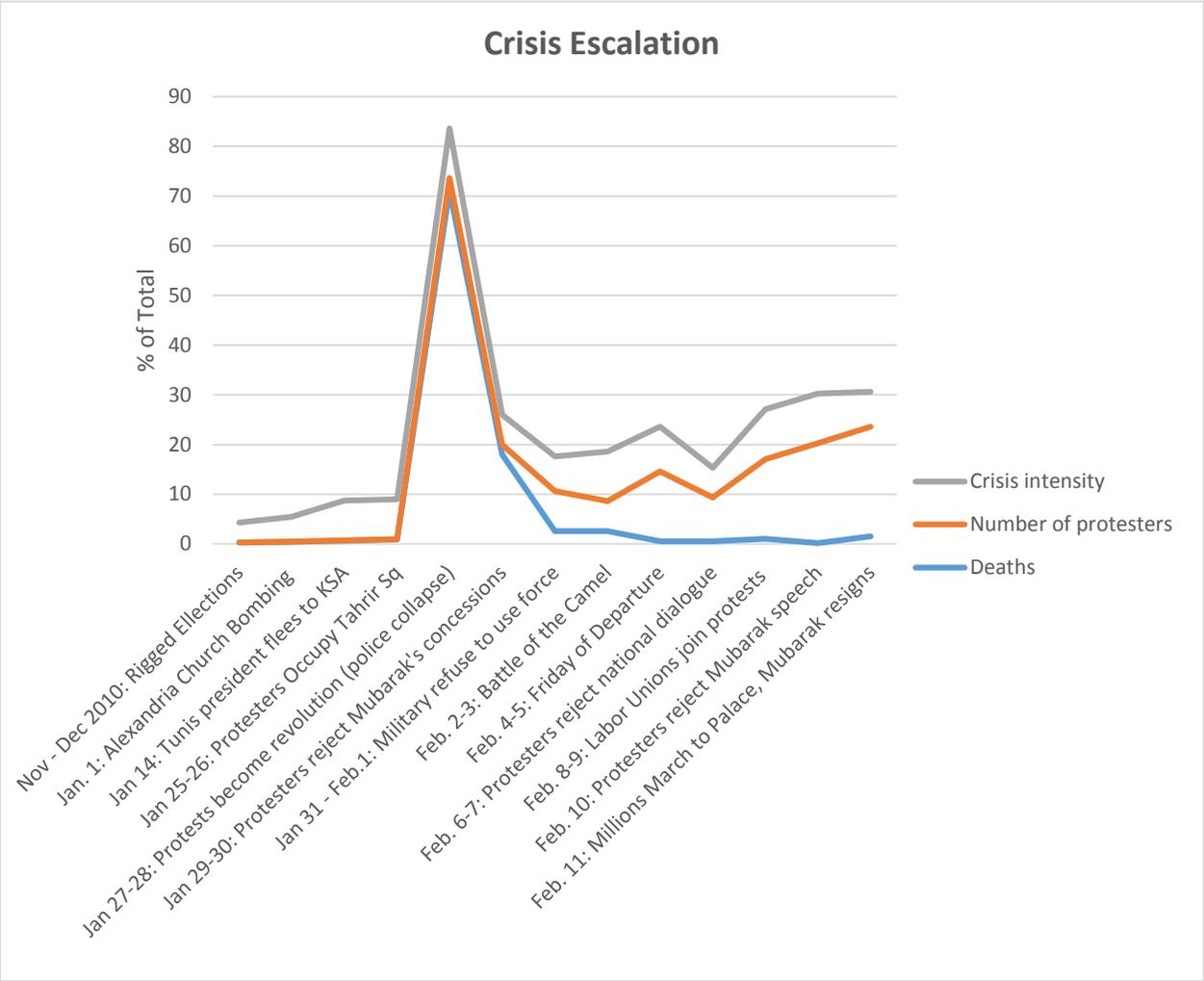


Figure- 6: Crisis Escalation

The above crisis escalation graph helps identify several decisive moments that shaped both the trajectory and outcome of the uprising. Before listing these events, it is important to first analyze the above graphical representation by recognizing patterns and extracting their meanings. Several antecedent events (Nov. 2010 – Jan. 14) coalesced, interacted and raised the crisis level to that of a perfect storm. In the first four days of the crisis (January 25-29), state repression (deaths) correlated with the number of protesters on the streets, up until the police forces faltered and retreated. Essentially, as the people wrestled with the state and prevailed (beyond which the

political costs of repression had become prohibitive) the state adjusted its policy to the new domestic balance of power. This pattern suggests that not only was the use of force applied proportionally to the perceived threat, but that the government increased its repression with the upsurge of protests *in an attempt to suppress popular mobilization*. January 28th marked the day the protests reached the revolutionary threshold beyond which the regime began to compromise and decrease its repressive measures. Essentially, past this revolutionary threshold, institutional incentives shifted as mass mobilization shattered the barriers of fear.

Crisis intensity, in hindsight, contributes to our assessment of the effects of certain events on subsequent protester-government interactions. Within the revolutionary phase, the graph shows that two events proved to be consequential: the Battle of the Camel (Feb. 2nd) and the joining of the uprising and nationwide staged sit-ins by the labor unions (Feb. 8th). Both of these led to the upsurge in protests, which raised further the popular ceiling for concessions and deepened the regime's sense of peril and uncertainty, further widening the gap between popular demands and what the regime was willing to offer to maintain the political survival of its top officials.

2. Motives behind Initial Crisis Response

Having established the pattern of the state's responses, it is crucial to explore the motives behind their policy choices to ascertain the extent to which the capacity to employ state repression without incurring substantial political costs to the regime (i.e., institutionalized impunity) played a role in making a particular policy decision. In this part, only a brief look is given at the initial government response to crisis since the next chapter offers a more in-depth analysis of how the process of decision-making unfolded during the uprisings to test the third hypothesis.

Multiple sources within or close to the ruling circle confirm that the Egyptian government opted for a ‘security solution’ at the onset of the mass unrest. In the first few days and until the police forces dissolved on January 28th, the Minister of Interior was in charge of dealing with what the regime considered to be a security rather than a political crisis. El-Menawi, who was then head of Egypt’s News Center (State Radio and Television) and reported directly to the Information Minister, argues:

In preparation for the expected troubles on the next day [Friday, January 28], Adly assumed presidential authority. He was using all the resources available to him as Interior Minister in an attempt to curtail the protests in any way possible. The move to cut telephone and internet services was led by him. I later found out about the telephone calls he was making to his fellow ministers, barking instructions at them. In one call, Tareq Kamel, the minister responsible for communications was unwilling to sever the country’s telecom services. Habib told him in no uncertain terms that he was speaking with the voice of the president, and his orders were to be followed.¹⁹

El-Menawi further emphasized that “[t]he major players in the government, particularly those around the President, were still confident that Al Adly and his Interior Ministry had everything under control.”²⁰ In addition, Abdel Kader Shohaib, a veteran journalist known for his close links with regime officials claimed, “until January 28, Mubarak continued to believe that he was protected by the strong and capable security apparatuses.”²¹ Most importantly, former Defense Minister Hussein Tantawi stated in an interview that the cabinet convened a meeting on January 20th to discuss plans to deal with the upcoming protests, and an agreement was reached that the Ministry of Interior would take charge and act “in accordance with standard procedures.”²² These

¹⁹ El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak*, p. 97

²⁰ Ibid, p. 79

²¹ Abdel Kader Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule*, p.124

²² Yousri Al Badri and Mohammed Al Qammash ‘Marshal Tantawi: The people gave the state to the Muslim Brotherhood...and Mubarak left the presidency suddenly’ *Al Masry Al Youm*, August 19, 2014 (Arabic)

standard procedures most likely referred to strategies used by the police in the past while dealing with similar protests.²³ Such strategies can be described briefly as one of allowing people to ‘blow off steam’, avoiding major public crackdowns at the outset, letting the protests lose momentum with time, and then dispersing the remaining crowds with tear gas and batons, arresting ringleaders and, finally, through emergency powers, try them in state security or military courts to serve lengthy prison terms and be subject to torture.

On January 25-26, the riot police initial response with tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets resulted in few fatalities,²⁴ however, when these means failed and the number of protesters swelled on the *Friday of Anger* (January 28th), they resorted to the widespread use of live ammunition and fought fiercely before collapsing out of exhaustion.²⁵ Egypt’s ‘Fact-Finding National Commission’ found that the police forces “used armored vehicles and intentionally ran over large number of protesters”, that it “employed snipers” among other fighting forces who “directed shots at the head, eyes and chest”, which were demonstrative of their intent to kill.²⁶ These official findings, which shed light on the police’s motives were corroborated by international human right organizations. For example, Amnesty International’s fact-finding team reported “extensive evidence of excessive use of force by security forces...including lethal force

²³ In the period 2004 -2010, Egypt witnessed an estimated 504 strikes, protests and sit-ins in which an approximately 1,350,000 individuals had participated in those collective actions and during which the ministry of interior had mastered and refined its strategy of containment, dispersion and punishment.

Khalid Ali Amr, Adel Waleem and Mahmoud Al Mensi, *Egypt Laborers 2009: Series of Labor and Social Mobilization*, (Cairo: The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, 2010): p. 16-18

²⁴ In addition to repression, the government employed a range of tactics including media campaign to cast protesters as terrorists, foreign agents and saboteurs and disrupt communication to impede collective action

²⁵ Mona Al Ghobashi argues that “Al Adly’s police force did not melt away in the face of a popular onslaught. They fought for four straight days on nearly every street corner in every major city, before finally being rendered inefficient by the dynamism and stamina of exceptionally diverse crowds, each with their own know-how in the art of interfacing with gendarmes.”

Mona El-Ghobashi, *The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution*, p.37

²⁶ ‘Summary of Final Report: Fact-Finding National Commission About the January 25, 2011 Revolution’ (Arabic) (accessed December 7, 2014) available from: www.ffnc-eg.org/assets/ffn-eg_final.pdf

against protesters and others posing no threat to their or others' lives" and that "they showed a flagrant disregard for human life and did not exercise restraint or seek to minimize injury, including to onlookers and bystanders."²⁷ In addition to the killing of protesters, the report found that "[t]housands of others were arbitrarily arrested and detained, seemingly outside the framework of any law, and many of them [were] subjected to torture or other ill-treatment, by the military."²⁸

Once in office on June 2012, President Morsi set up another Fact-Finding Commission to investigate the killings during the revolution on January 25th. The government did not release the commission's report and it remained confidential in the aftermath of the military coup in 2013. A recent leak of the commission's conclusion, stated the commission found that the killings of protesters by the security forces were "premeditated", and that the Ministry of Interior "destroyed evidence" and "doctored records and inventory books" among other things, all of which resulted in a series of acquittals of policemen charged with killing protesters.²⁹ Most significantly, and as Hazem Kandil, a Cambridge University scholar in Political Sociology and author of *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt* (2012), remarks

Not a single police officer has been charged with a single offence before or after the revolt. Mubarak's last interior minister was tried in court as a member of Mubarak's cabinet rather than as a member of the security service, and imprisoned for failing to protect demonstrators rather than for killing them.³⁰

In conclusion, the *pattern* of the use of force at the onset of the mass revolts coupled with the security forces' *intent* to suppress the protests violently (and the regime's leadership knowledge

²⁷ 'Egypt Rises' *Amnesty International*, May 2011, p. 28-29

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 97

²⁹ 'Leaked Fact-Finding Report on the killing of protesters of the January 25 Revolution' *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, April 1, 2014 (Arabic) (Accessed December 7, 2014).

Available from: <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/investigations/feb3619a-25f1-4b36-b3b9-c043c11a10ee>

³⁰ Hazem Kandil 'Deadlock in Cairo' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 35, No. 6, pp. 17-20 (March 21, 2013): p. 18

of such *intent*) and, most crucially, the *ex post acquittal* of policemen charged with killing protesters,³¹ along with the acquittal of Mubarak, former Interior Minister Al Adly and all other former top officials strongly suggests that the *regime's institutionalized impunity*; i.e., the perception that the regime could repress and get away with it, played some role in the calculus of crisis policy choices.

3. Findings and Conclusions

This chapter probed the argument and sought to find empirical evidence that when a regime perceives it enjoys *lower costs of employing state repression, they are more likely to respond with violent repression at the onset of popular unrest*. Embedded within this proposition is the further assumption that a state will begin to concede only when the political costs of repression become counterproductive (after reaching a prohibitive threshold). Before restating the findings, it is crucial to acknowledge that diverse factors, actors and structural forces shape a government's initial responses upon confronting tumultuous protests, and hence, researchers should avoid monocausal explanations.

By exploring the *pattern* of the Mubarak regime's repression-concession responses, by revealing the most likely *intent* behind its violence against protesters, by analyzing the government conflict behavior manifested in its *self-confident repression at initial crisis phase* coupled with the *lack of adequate accountability a posteriori*, it is plausible to suggest, that in this particular case, the regime's *ex ante institutionalized impunity* (i.e., leaders' perception of low political costs of state repression) most likely influenced its crisis decision calculus, together with other potentially

³¹ 'Egypt police acquitted of uprising deaths as Mursi calls for "peaceful" revolt' *Al Akhbar*, February 22, 2014

determining factors.³² As was argued in the previous chapter, consolidation of the regime's power over state institutions provided the political and legal infrastructure, empowered by emergency laws and concentration of authority in the executive, to repress with impunity. Authoritarian regimes, in which officials face very few institutional constraints in their policymaking and where leaders are rarely held accountable or punished for their actions, tend to foster an institutional setting and domestic political incentives that allow said leaders to internalize low political costs to the use of repression against their populace. This institutional setting, however, did not *push* Mubarak's officials down the path to suppress the protests violently; rather, it provided the low cost options that influenced the leader's preferences, strategies and actions. In essence, their policy choices could be partly attributed *to the probability of their being able to suppress the uprisings through violent repression and to survive any potential domestic reprisal*; that is to say, that they could afford the resultant political costs to do so. This finding comes with the following caveats.

According to the literature, governments as well as protesters constantly reevaluate their policy positions during crises of mass contention based on the outcomes of their previous interactions. Therefore, in dividing the uprisings into several crises, one can no longer treat them as the same given the seeming feedback loop, adaptation to developments and "authoritarian learning" that influence how governments modify their strategies according to what happened in the preceding crisis.³³ However, this dampening effect on the hypothesized relationship becomes more pronounced particularly at the moment the balance of power begins to shift against the incumbent, as was the case in Egypt. This is to say, that the regime continued to repress (Jan. 25-

³² Numerous factors could be at work, including the actual or perception of strength and commitment of protesters and the extent to which mobilization is viewed as legitimate by the larger population.

³³ Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders 'Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening' *Globalizations*, Vol. 8, No. 5, pp. 647-653 (October, 2011)

28) until its police forces faltered, and that event triggered its policy adjustments after this date (Jan. 29).

Regarding the assumption that states continue to repress until repression reaches a certain ‘prohibitive threshold’, it is unclear whether or not January 28th, the bloodiest day in the uprisings and when repression reached its pinnacle, represents this hypothesized threshold. While the regime immediately began to offer concessions after having applied its maximum repression as predicted, the police could have continued repressing had it not collapsed from exhaustion. In addition, had the military not defected early on for its own reasons,³⁴ it would have most likely come to the regime’s rescue and use force against the revolt as it did before when suppressing a nationwide *bread riot* in 1977 and a security forces mutiny in 1986. Most significantly, the number of casualties remained unknown until finalized by the fact-finding commission several weeks after the crises; hence, neither the regime nor the protesters had an accurate account of how many were killed and injured at any specific time during the crisis. Therefore, this study cannot substantiate the assumption of a prohibitive threshold.

Regimes select policies that both minimize any threats to their hold on power (i.e., they are willing to incur the *acceptable* costs of their use of repression) and which have a higher probability of success in defeating collective action. While the widely described as ‘too little too late concessions’ by Mubarak’s leadership could be the result of the chaotic nature of the crisis, the lack of adequate information,³⁵ and the increase in protesters’ demands as the number of casualties

³⁴ Multiple sources state that the military was unhappy with Mubarak’s plan to groom his son for the presidency. In the last decade, Gamal who was often described as Egypt’s *de facto* president has empowered his business coterie of ministers and began to threaten the military’s vast economic interests.

³⁵ Shohaib attributes ‘a general atmosphere of confusion, chaos and lack of capacity to think clearly’ that it took Mubarak four days to comprehend the gravity of crisis and speak to the public in a televised address. Abdel Kader Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule*, p. 9

swelled, it was also most probably due to a calculated strategy in which the regime sought – and failed – to repress and concede in proportionate measures.³⁶ In other word, they could not manage *to repress just enough* to raise the costs of collective action without inciting further mobilization, while at the same time *concede just enough* without showing weakness nor encouraging additional demands.³⁷

However, to obtain such a balance would have been at best elusive within the rapid pace of change during the crises: the size, popularity and resolve of protesters was always in constant flux during the unrest and there were changes occurring within the regime itself. Among the latter, there were defections (the military), splits within the coalition (resignation of NDP officials) and loss of strength (collapse of police forces), all of which could increase the probability of miscalculating the ‘appropriate’ policy response at any given moment. In fact, and as was observed, a miscalculation at one point (Battle of the Camel) set off a cascade of events which paradoxically made it even more difficult for the government to identify what would be the appropriate repression-concession balance and to adequately assess, calibrate and adjust its policy choices. This miscalculation kept the regime ‘behind the curve’ throughout the revolt.

Another critical factor that may have influenced the government’s crisis response is the operating procedures followed by the security apparatus in managing collective action. This may explain why the police initially responded with restraint and avoided employing extreme

³⁶ El-Menawi argued that Gamal, who played a vital role in setting government policies during that crisis “believed that it was possible to get the body politics to compromise on a deal as long as they got just a small part of what they [the protesters] demanded. He always operated like that, and it became particularly apparent during the crisis.” Abdel Latif El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 days of Mubarak*, p. 176

³⁷ Dana Moss argues that the Jordanian government was more successful in maintaining the intricate balance between repression and concession in responding to its ‘Arab Spring’ popular protests, describing how such balance ended with “contained escalation”.

Dana Moss ‘How Jordan’s protest movement mattered’ *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2014

repression on the first day of the uprisings, believing they were dealing with just another protest. Had the police used overwhelming violence at the outset, the costs of collective action would have increased, however, such a strategy would have most likely provoked a backlash since excessive force would be judged illegitimate by the public and it would have incited further anti-government rebellion.

Additionally, Mubarak's idiosyncratic tendencies and personality traits may have played a role in his policy decisions. For example, Mustafa Al Fiqi, a veteran diplomat, NDP official and Mubarak's former secretary, described the president as someone "who hates change...he doesn't like to take decisions under pressure or to be arm twisted into making any specific policy decision."³⁸ Furthermore, after Mubarak's final televised address on February 10, a disappointment even for government officials who were expecting a resignation speech, El-Menawi reported: "I called my contacts: army, intelligence, everyone, and asked them what had happened. They all said that they couldn't do anything. The old man was stubborn, and Gamal was trying to take charge."³⁹

It is important to point out that in this case study, the causal relationship between the perceived political costs of repression and crisis policy decisions was more pronounced at the *onset* of the crisis. Once the security forces collapsed and the military publicly declared its neutrality, blunt repression was no longer a viable option, and this fact forced the regime to rely on hired thugs during the Battle of the Camel. From its deployment on January 28th onward, the military's stance played the dominant role in shaping the outcome of the crisis and perhaps dampened the effects of other causal factors. When Mubarak and his civilian coalition failed to resolve the crisis,

³⁸ Moustafa Al Fiqi, *Years of Lost Opportunities* Program, *Al Nahar* TV, April 14, 2012. (Arabic) (Accessed December 11, 2014) Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhRjdKrsHAY&app=desktop>

³⁹ El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 days of Mubarak*, p. 291

it prompted the military to oust its own president to prevent the escalation from mass mobilization into an all-out sweeping revolution and, begin to broker a political transition in favor of stability and preserving the military's institutional interests and privileges.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The outcome of this case study conforms to the literature's Large-N findings, which indicates that most authoritarian leaders are forcibly removed from power by government insiders, through palace or military coup, rather than the result of popular uprisings. Essentially, the ruling elite attempt to salvage the regime by dislodging a leader who has become a threat to the authoritarian political survival. See for example; Milan Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Milan Svobik and Akcinaroglu 'Government Change in Authoritarian Regimes' Dataset; H.E. Goemans 'Which Way Out? The Manner and Consequences of Losing Office' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 6, pp. 771-794 (December 2008)

Chapter 7

Shifts in the ‘Authoritative Decision Unit’ during Crisis

This chapter aims to delve inside the ‘black box’ of government decision-making by examining the ‘authoritative decision unit’ throughout the crisis. The authoritative decision unit represents the apparatus within the government that actually *selects*, and has the capacity to *commit resources* and *implement* policy decisions.¹ The decision unit can be a powerful leader, a single group (e.g., the cabinet) or a coalition of autonomous actors (e.g., interest groups, diverse bureaucratic agencies, etc.).² The formation of power centers within the state structure prior or during crises is consequential to state’s conflict behavior since numerous domestic and international factors are channeled through the individuals that make up the decision unit.³ The third hypothesis in this research is that the authoritative decision unit changes throughout the crisis. In other words, crises of mass uprisings in autocracies present an opportune moment for various domestic actors (the dictator, the military establishment, the ruling political party, etc.) to compete and tilt the balance of power in their favor while attempting to maximize their political survival in a setting marred by intrigue, uncertainty and violence. When a government offers incoherent and clashing crisis policies – i.e., suboptimal decision outcomes – it is often an expression of intra-regime rivalry for power whereby a decision unit at one stage in the crisis is replaced by another at a different stage. Abdel Monem Said Aly, comments on the Egyptian government’s crisis response stating,

¹ Margaret G. Herman ‘How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework’ *International Studies Review*, Vol.3, Issue 2, pp. 47-81 (Summer 2001)

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*, p. 47

While its paralysis was due in part to the unanticipated levels of participation, it was also a result of the fact that there was more than one group making decisions. According to the available information, there were multiple centers of decision making, often taking different and contradictory courses of action that contributed to the toppling of the regime.⁴

A shift in the decision unit often occurs in authoritarian governments facing existential threats from domestic revolts, particularly at the stage when the threats intensify and members of the regime elites race to ‘jump ship’. For example, in the 2011 Tunisian uprising, observers noted that the state’s response was initially made at the cabinet level (single group), and was followed by a concentration of policymaking in the hands of the president Ben Ali (powerful leader) as the crisis escalated. However, after almost four weeks into the uprising and with no resolution on the horizon, the president had exhausted all his chances to quell or appease the protesters, frustration within the regime elites mounted and part of his security apparatus began to defect. Sensing a shift in power, the president then fled to Saudi Arabia.⁵ Did a similar shift in the authoritarian decision unit occur in the Egyptian case? And who were these decision units? This chapter seeks to answer these questions.

It is important to stress the following points at the outset. First, this research does not advance the decision unit framework as a model of decision making, but rather that the framework builds on existing decision processes such as groupthink, personality of leaders and bureaucratic

⁴ Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 40

⁵ See for example ‘The Escape from the Palace of Qartaj’ Part 1, 2, 3 *Al Arabiya Channel*. The documentary film, based on Tunisian official investigation files, reconstructs the final days of Ben Ali and his government before his escape to Saudi Arabia. Ben Ali delivered his third and final speech on January 13 in which he pledged to implement democratic reforms and demanded the security forces to refrain from using live ammunition against protesters. However, protests grew more intense on January 14, which promoted the president to declare a state of national emergency and placed the military in charge to restore order. On the same day, reports abounded that protesters began marching to the presidential palace and that security forces prevented members of the ruling family from boarding their flights. Officials close to the president described him as being “paranoid” for his life as he was convinced that part of his security apparatus had defected. As the situation grew more volatile and uncertain, the ruling family fled to Saudi Arabia.

politics. Second, studying the decision unit in any given crisis is a complex issue where information is often murky and the domestic balance of power is in state of flux. Therefore, the author will attempt to disentangle and simplify the complex events given the sources available. Third, in exploring the merits of the above-mentioned hypothesis, this chapter focuses on shifts in the decision unit rather than on the specific policy decisions made and the motives behind the choices of each authoritative unit. Fourth, while autocratic leaders are the ultimate authority in policymaking, it is rare for the decision unit to remain unchanged throughout national emergencies, especially in highly bureaucratized governments where state institutions and specialized agencies, depending on the nature of the problem, retain some influence on the *implementation* of state policy responses. The table below clarifies the boundaries between decision units.

Decision Unit	Description
Predominant leader	A Leader uses advisors for information, but he has the final say in decision making. If a leader considers his advisors (and close family members) as a team to make decisions, the decision unit constitutes a single group.
Single group	Members of a single body who make decisions collectively, such as cabinet, ruling family, or ministry
Coalition of autonomous actors	Multiple independent entities that must work together to affect policy, this may include NGOs

Table -4: Typology of Decision Units

Source: 'How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy' by Margaret G. Herman, p. 56-57

1. Key Decision Actors in Egypt

According to multiple sources, the following regime officials were the key decision makers during the 2011 uprising:

- President Hosni Mubarak
- Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and Deputy Secretary General of the ruling NDP
- Omar Suleiman, head of the General Intelligence Service (GIS) and appointed Vice President on the fifth day into the crisis (January 29, 2011)
- Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces
- Habib Al Adly, Interior Minister, dismissed from his post on January 31st
- Zakaria Azmi, the President's Chief of staff
- Anas Al Feki, Information Minister
- Ahmed Shafik, prime minister, appointed on the seventh day into the uprising (January 31)

2. Decision Units during the 18-day Crisis

Formation and shifts in the authoritative decision unit occurred during certain decisive events in the uprising. These events include the deployment of the military to the streets and the intra-regime rejection of Mubarak's last speech. The following phases illustrate how the locus of decisional power shifted.

Phase 1: January 25-28

As stated in the previous chapter, the Egyptian government convened a cabinet meeting on January 20th to discuss strategies to cope with the protests. According to Defense Minister Tantawi, the cabinet agreed that the Interior Ministry would be in charge of dealing with the unrest in accordance with operating procedures, and with the support of other state agencies.⁶ Therefore, policy decisions were made at the cabinet minister's level under the assumption that the government would be confronting yet another large protest. The ministry of interior established a crisis management cell and an operations center tasked to implement the national emergency plan, which included the recommendation to shut down all communication lines.⁷ Interior minister Al Adly maintained contact with the president and was granted 'presidential authority' to deal with the crisis.⁸ In fact, Al Adly remained at the helm of the state's crisis response team and was the regime's main spokesperson until his police forces collapsed on January 28th. Between January 20-28, Al Adly issued several statements to the press, declaring that the police forces had "allowed the protests to take place", that "these protests are not new given that the government had witnessed greater number of demonstrators in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq" and, that "the Egyptian ruling regime is not fragile or marginal, but rather is supported by millions".⁹

The following is one of the most relevant examples illustrating the shifts in the authoritative decision unit. On June 6, 2012 during Mubarak's criminal case verdict,¹⁰ the court posited that,

⁶ Yousri Al Badri and Mohammed Al Qammash 'Marshal Tantawi: The people gave the state to the Muslim Brotherhood' *Al Masry Al Youm*, August 19, 2014 (Arabic)

⁷ 'Summary of Final Report: Fact-Finding National Commission' p.27 available from: www.ffnc-eg.org/assets/ffn-eg_final.pdf

⁸ El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak*, p. 97

⁹ See for Example: 'Al Adly to Al Rai: The Egyptian ruling regime is not fragile or marginal, millions support it...thousands (of protesters) won't shake it' *Al Rai Media Group*, January 27, 2011. (Arabic)

¹⁰ The convictions were later overturned and the defendants acquitted of all charges due to technicality

according to documented evidence such as the defendants' affidavit and the witness testimony of top former officials including Vice President Suleiman and Defense Minister Tantawi, "all information about events that occurred between January 25 and January 28 was directed to the Minister of Interior, Al Adly" who had been delegated to manage the protests. Later, Al Adly, "informed president Mubarak about the January 25th protests and its fallout, and also about the injuries and deaths of protesters on January 28, 2011."¹¹ Mustafa Bakri, a veteran journalist, former MP and editor-in-chief of *Al Osbou* (Weekly) newspaper reports that when the police forces dissolved on January 28, Al Adly called the president to inform him that his forces could no longer deal with the protests. The president then asked Al Adly to speak to Field Marshal Tantawi in order to deploy the army. When Al Adly called, Tantawi was surprised to receive the president's order from the interior minister, and thus decided to call the president himself. Mubarak replied, "Didn't Al Adly tell you what I said?"¹² In short, what has been presented thus far shows that the decision unit in this period of the crisis was composed of a single group; namely, the ministry of interior.

Phase 2: January 29 – February 10

When the President asked the Military to deploy its units and support the embattled security forces, it was reported that, reveal

He was firmly but politely told that the army would place units in major intersections, and protect buildings and major landmarks, but would not shoot at the people...they told him that he had to negotiate with the protesters to end the

¹¹ See for example: 'Tantawi's Court Deposition' *Youm7*, June 02, 2012.

¹² Mustafa Bakri. Interview, in Amr Ellissy's program *Al Maidan* "The President and the Field Marshal" *Al Tahrir TV*, Cairo, Egypt. September 22, 2011. (Arabic)

crisis. Meanwhile, they assured him of their loyalty and that they would stay neutral while he dealt with the situation.¹³

On January 29 and after dissolving the government in his first televised speech earlier that day, Mubarak sought to appoint someone to the long vacated vice president post. El-Menawi reported that

Mubarak had a few meetings that day, one of which was with his Defense Minister, Field Marshal Tantawi. He offered Tantawi the position of Vice President. Tantawi refused. He offered Tantawi the role of Prime Minister. Tantawi refused. Tantawi was insistent he would not leave the army...Mubarak was convinced [by now] that he had lost control of the army...Tantawi felt that his place was with the army. If he left the army, then it may have fallen back into the control of the Presidential Palace and could potentially be used against the general public, if the protests were to drag on.¹⁴

The military – and the intelligence services – were unhappy with Gamal’s economic policies as well as with his plans to succeed his father.¹⁵ While Mubarak allowed the Military to build a business empire so vast that one estimate puts its share of the national economy up to 40%,¹⁶ these business holdings were threatened by Gamal’s privatization program which sought to enrich his cronies and hence,

The military was on the verge of losing significant assets if Mubarak stayed in power and handed the presidential office over to his appointed successor, his son Gamal... Thus there was a strong economic incentive for the military to side with civil resisters, forcing Mubarak out.¹⁷

¹³ Esam Al Amin ‘When Egypt’s Revolution was at the Crossroads’ *Counterpunch*, March 9, 2011.

¹⁴ El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 days of Mubarak*, p. 139, 140

¹⁵ Abdel Kader Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule*, p.99

¹⁶ James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): p.62

¹⁷ Sharon Erickson Nepstad ‘Mutiny and Non-Violence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain and Syria’ *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 337-349 (May, 2013): p. 342

A clear split within the government occurred at this time with the result that leadership divided the decision unit between two groups. According to El Menawi,

[f]rom January 28th onward, it became clear that there were two groups managing the crisis: first, the presidential palace led by Gamal, Zakaria Azmi (the president's chief of staff) and Anas Al Fiqqi (Information Minister) and, second, the military led by Tantawi.¹⁸

This division in authority was propelled by the fact that “part of the regime wanted to get rid of the succession plan and hence took the January 25 uprising as an opportunity to once and for all finish it off. Omar Suleiman and Field Marshal Tantawi were against Gamal's presidential ambitions.”¹⁹ Once the split ensued, “it became a power struggle between the president and his defense minister: who will displace the other.”²⁰

Tantawi and the rest of commanders in the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) led the military decision unit. The SCAF, as a single group, showed discipline and coherence among its members and did not equivocate or back down on its strategy throughout the crisis. By contrast, the presidential palace decision unit suffered internal splits as different factions sought divergent resolutions to the uprisings. It is noteworthy that all available sources emphasize Gamal's enormous influence on the president's policy choices. For example, then Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik argued “President Mubarak made a grave mistake by allowing his son Gamal to play the role he played. Gamal brought calamity to his father, the ruling family and the country”.²¹ Also, then Foreign minister Ahmed Abul Gheit stated that “Gamal remained attached to his father

¹⁸ Abdel Latif El-Menawi. Interview, in ‘Special Interview’ Program, Part 2. *Al Arabiya Channel*. February 5, 2012. (Arabic)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Mohammed El Baz. Interview, in ‘The Last Days of Mubarak's Rule’ Documentary Film, *Aljazeera Channel*, March 6, 2013

²¹ Ahmed Shafik. Interview, in ‘Political Memory’ program, part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. February 17, 2012 (Arabic)

throughout the crisis.”²² He said as well that he had met with the president to discuss ways to resolve the crisis, “the president told me to take my suggestions to Gamal. I didn’t do it.”²³ El-Menawi posited that “in the last three years of his presidency and due to health problems, Mubarak had delegated much of his authority to his son Gamal, and all in the government dealt with Gamal as the president in-waiting. He was the de facto president”²⁴ and that “throughout the crisis, Gamal exercised great influence on the president’s policy decisions and, that together with Azmi and Al Fiqqi, he also wrote the president’s speeches.”²⁵

Fissures in the palace’s decision group began when Mubarak appointed Ahmed Shafik as prime minister on January 31 to appease protesters. Shafik’s government replaced the corrupt businessmen associated with Gamal. Shafik commented that he “would not have accepted the position of prime minister if Gamal were still in his position, [because] it would not have worked with the old setup.”²⁶ However, Gamal continued to play a dominant role in the decision-making process and he firmly believed that minimal concessions combined with coercion would save the regime and return things to the status quo ante. Therefore, he had failed to grasp the gravity of the situation.²⁷ Gamal along with his coterie of business tycoons in the NDP leadership were too far removed from the widespread social and economic hardships that beset average Egyptians.²⁸

²² Ahmed Abul Gheit. Interview, in ‘Political Memory’ program, part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. March 28, 2014. (Arabic)

²³ Ibid, part 2. April 5, 2014. (Arabic)

²⁴ Abdel Latif El-Menawi. Interview, in ‘Special Interview’ program, Part 1, *Al Arabiya Channel*, February 5, 2012.

²⁵ Ibid, part 2

²⁶ Ahmed Shafik ‘*Political Memory*’ part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*.

²⁷ Abdel Kader Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule*, p.67 (Arabic)

²⁸ Ibid, p. 126

The rift within the president's decision unit widened further after the Battle of the Camel,²⁹ the assassination attempt on Omar Suleiman,³⁰ and most importantly, after the appointment of Hossam Badrawi as the new Secretary General of the NDP. Aly reports that Badrawi soon realized that Mubarak had been misinformed about the full extent of the crisis, which partly explained his belated and insufficient policy response.³¹ Others also presented similar observations to the effect that the "President received toned down reports of the unrest, was assured that there were capable people managing the crisis and, that there were simple solutions to the problems."³²

Mohammed El Baz, deputy editor-in-chief of Al Fajr newspaper and journalist who had the opportunity to look at some of the intelligence reports sent to Mubarak, argues that "most of these reports did not present an accurate picture of the crisis: they described the protests as a conspiracy by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah determined to topple the regime."³³

Aly who had contacts with Badrawi, states,

I received a glimpse of the real situation when Husam Badrawi gave me a report detailing his talks with the President as he worked on a deal to transfer Mubarak's powers to the Vice President. Husam explained the situation to Mubarak and told him that he was facing a "Ceausescu moment"...to which the President's response was simply, "Is it that bad?"³⁴

²⁹ El Menawi states that on the morning hours of February 2nd, he "received orders from the government to take the TV cameras off from Tahrir Square because something 'ugly' will happen"

Abdel Latif El-Menawi. Interview, in "Special Interview" *Al Arabiya Channel*, Part 2. February 5, 2012.

³⁰ The assassination attempt was reported and confirmed by numerous sources, including then Prime Minister Ahmad Shafik and foreign minister Ahmed Abul Gheit, in interviews by Taher Barakeh, *The Political Memory* TV Program in Al Arabiya Channel. Both former officials stated that there was a high level investigation in the wake of the incident and the findings were kept classified by then president Mubarak. Many analysts in Egypt have since speculated that either Gamal Mubarak or one of his close supporters were the most likely suspects behind the assassination attempt since appointing Suleiman as vice president meant that Gamal had lost his chances to win the presidency. Suleiman was known to have opposed Gamal's policies and was against his succession project.

³¹ Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 39

³² Abdel Latif El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 days of Mubarak*, p. 176

³³ Mohammed El Baz. Interview, in 'The Last Days of Mubarak's Rule' *Aljazeera Channel*.

³⁴ Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 9

On February 9th in a meeting with the president, Badrawi was adamant and asked the president to transfer all his power to his vice president and to leave for Sharm Al Shaikh as the only solution to the crisis. Mubarak refused, and Gamal scolded Badrawi for the ‘audacity’ to suggest that the president should resign.³⁵ Badrawi then left in protest, and went public announcing that he *expected* Mubarak to resign, which prompted the Prime Minister to declare a slightly toned-down statement saying that the president *could* step down,³⁶ while the information minister, who was part of Mubarak’s inner circle, denied the reports of potential resignation.³⁷ These clashing statements reflected a conflict within Mubarak’s decision unit; primarily between those who wanted to salvage the regime with minimal erosion to its hold on power, and those who wanted to save the president at all costs. By February 10, rumors abounded of Mubarak’s impending resignation.³⁸

To further prod Mubarak into stepping down, the SCAF held its first meeting on that same day, without Mubarak, and broadcasted its first statement, announcing on national TV that it would continue in session. Such type of statements often signal an imminent coup, and this one was designed to send the unambiguous message to the president that he was no longer in control and that decisions would be made without him if he didn’t ‘meet people’s demands’. Giving in to this pressure, the media reported that Mubarak finally agreed to deliver his final resignation speech on the evening of the same day, February 10. However, multiple sources indicate that Gamal intervened by rewriting parts of the speech at the last minute. He changed its wording from being

³⁵ Mustafa Bakri. Interview, in Amr Ellissy program Al Maidan. *Al Tahrir TV*

³⁶ See for example: ‘Mubarak responds to the demands of protesters...Egyptian Prime Minister: Mubarak could resign tonight’ *Alarrab news*, February 10, 2011 (Arabic).

Many newspapers in English, and perhaps in other languages, missed the subtle linguistic difference between Badrawi’s statement and that of the Prime Minister.

³⁷ See for example: ‘Egypt’s Information Minister Denies Mubarak will Step Down’ WBRZ, February 10, 2011.

³⁸ See for example: ‘Mubarak’s Resignation Rumors Grow’ *The Guardian*, February 10, 2011.

one of ‘resigning and handing over power’, to being one of “I thought I would delegate powers to the vice president, according to the constitution”, preceded by a pledge to “follow-up what he promised” on proposed constitutional amendments and national dialogue “until people will choose as their leader in transparent and free elections.”³⁹ This rewrite implied that the president would maintain his position and reclaim his delegated powers at any time in the future when the crisis abates.

Mubarak’s inner circle believed that the president could still ride out the uprising, which was another indicator of how out of touch they were with the massive callings for Mubarak’s immediate departure. The president’s speech came out as a desperate and humiliating bid to cling to power that not only outraged the protesters, who then started marching to the presidential palace, but also disappointed his own regime officials, i.e., those who were expecting him to step down and prevent Egypt from sliding into further chaos and economic ruin. After talking to President Mubarak on the phone on the early hours of February 10, El-Menawi realized that,

the President was in another world. He didn’t understand the depth of the crisis affecting the country. He was not thinking about what he had to do in the coming days, or hours, he was thinking of how to convince the people later on of his achievements over decades.⁴⁰

Despite Gamal’s dominant role in Egypt’s crisis policy decisions, as underscored by many sources, the presidential decision unit is best described as a single group rather than as a predominant leader. This inner circle collectively made decisions and included the president himself, his son Gamal, Zakaria Azmi and Anas Al Fiqqi. In addition, the president overrode several of Gamal’s suggestions, including the proposal to dismiss the defense minister and the

³⁹ Full text of Mubarak’s Last Speech, CNN, February 11, 2011.
Available from: <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/02/10/egypt.mubarak.statement/>

⁴⁰ El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 days of Mubarak*, p. 275-276

chief of staff armed forces and replace them with officers who would be willing to use military force to crush the uprising and save the president.⁴¹ The inner circle assumed the strategic level in policymaking, whereas the remainder of the president's decision unit which can be referred to as the 'outer circle', was at best marginal to the policy decisions' process and remained preoccupied, instead, with the operational level of crisis management.

The outer circle was composed of the Vice President, the Prime Minister, the cabinet and the new NDP top official.⁴² For example, Foreign Minister Abul Gheit stated "VP Suleiman was too bashful to be absolutely frank with the president [to ask him to step down] because of his absolute loyalty to Mubarak."⁴³ As a result, Suleiman remained within the role prescribed for him by handling media appearances and by personally engaging in the negotiations with the protests' leaders in a quest for a political compromise out of the crisis, threatening them with a possible coup if an agreement was not reached by the regime's timetable.⁴⁴ Prime Minister Shafik admitted that he "did not advise the president for any specific action during the crisis"⁴⁵ and the leadership confined Badrawi's role to policy recommendations and he later resigned in response to Mubarak's stubbornness.⁴⁶

⁴¹ "After the first Military communique (on January 31) in which it acknowledged the legitimacy of the protesters' demands and pledged not to use force against the people, Gamal Mubarak tried to convince his father to dismiss defense minister Tantawi and chief of staff Sami Anan, but vice president Suleiman advised against such approach reminding the president that the military is now in control of the country."

Mustafa Bakri. Interview, in 'The Last Days of Mubarak's Rule' *Aljazeera Channel*.

⁴² Former NDP officials associated with Gamal were made to resign from their posts and many were placed under house arrest as a form of concession to protesters.

⁴³ Ahmed Abul Gheit. Interview, in 'Political Memory' program, Part 2, *Al Arabiya Channel*

⁴⁴ See for example: 'Egypt protesters defiant as Omar Suleiman warns a coup' *The Guardian*, February 9, 2011

⁴⁵ Ahmed Shafik. Interview, in 'Political Memory' program. Part 2, *Al Arabiya Channel*

⁴⁶ See for example: 'Mubarak's final hours: Desperate bids to stay' *USA Today*, February 12, 2011.

Phase 3: Friday, February 11

As the unrest further escalated and threatened to spiral out of control on the morning hours of February 11, “Tantawi informed the President that a possible bloody confrontation might ensue between the demonstrators and the Republican Guards, and that it would be better for him and the country if he and his family departed for Sharm el-Sheikh.”⁴⁷ Mubarak, realizing that the ‘game was over’ relented, and was flown to his resident in the sea resort. By now, the SCAF was frustrated and its patience exhausted as the widespread demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins intensified and brought the country almost to a grinding halt. With the military in control, it had to bring an end to the turmoil while an untold numbers of Egyptians came to the streets after Friday’s prayer, surrounded the presidential palace and vowed to continue protesting until Mubarak was ousted from power. Later that afternoon, Tantawi, Suleiman and Shafik met and decided that Mubarak must resign immediately. Bakri, claiming to have obtained information from top military officials, reported that Suleiman had to break the news to Mubarak and that the conversation on the phone went as follows:

Suleiman: The situation has become extremely dangerous in the country.

Mubarak: I have transferred authority to you...you can deal with it.

Suleiman: It is important that *you* deal with it Mr. President.

Mubarak: What do you want me to do?

Suleiman: I, along with the defense minister and prime minister, would like you to resign to save the country. You have no other choice Mr. President, I and the military agreed that you resign to save Egypt

Mubarak: (after a brief moment of silence) Bring the TV crew (to Sharm Al Shaikh) to broadcast the resignation speech.

Suleiman: We have no time for that. We have to do it here.

Mubarak: I need to hear the speech before it is broadcasted.

⁴⁷ Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 43-44

[Suleiman wrote the speech, called back and read it to the president.]

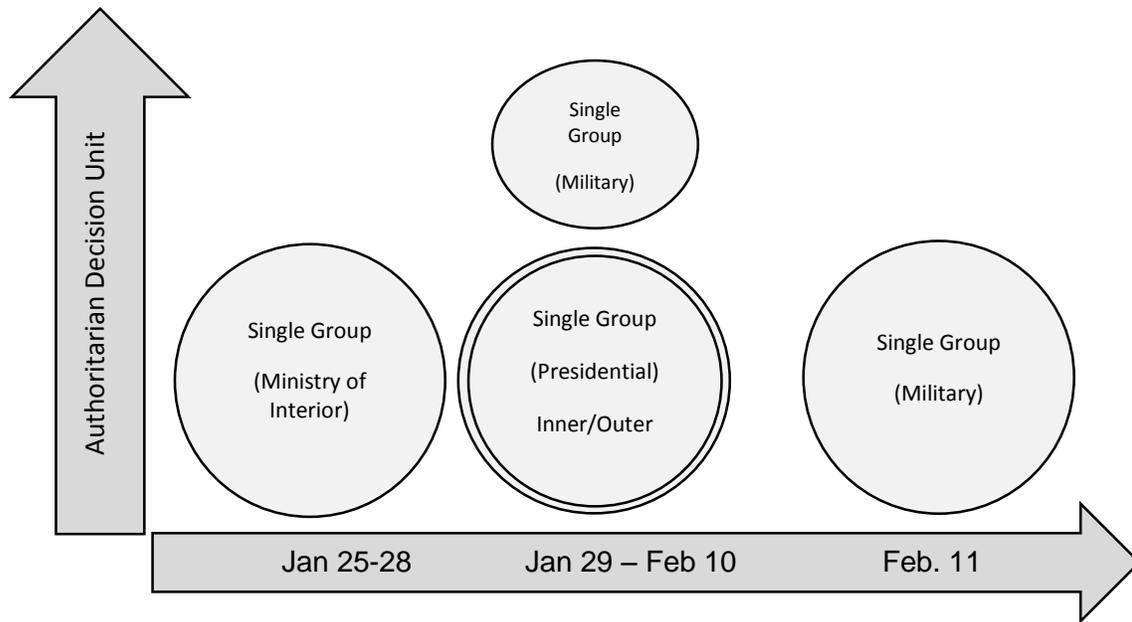
Mubarak: Fine...with one condition, broadcast the speech only after Gamal and the family depart for Sharm Al Shaikh.⁴⁸

Shortly after 6 pm local time, Suleiman delivered his final resignation speech handing power over to the armed forces.

3. Findings and Conclusions

This section sought to explore the hypothesis that *the authoritative decision unit changes during crises*. In this Egyptian uprising, as the diagram below illustrates, the state's policy response began at the ministry of interior's level. However, once the crisis escalated, government decision making became highly centralized in the executive; a finding consistent with the crisis management literature. A rift opened early in the crisis between Mubarak and the military due to the outstanding rejection of the latter to Gamal's economic policies and presidential ambitions. In this regard, pre-existing bureaucratic tensions intensified during the national emergency and proved consequential to the crisis outcome. In the last day of the crisis, and after delivering the last speech that angered both friend and foe, Mubarak's authoritarian centralization of decisional power gave in to indecision and inaction in the face of the turmoil: the president had nothing more to offer to deal with the crisis, and this induced the military to step in and grab the yoke of power to save the country.

⁴⁸ Mustafa Bakri. Interview, in Amr Ellissy program Al Maidan. *Al Tahrir TV*



It was also observed that some critical decisions were made by a small number of people, specifically the president’s inner circle which constituted a single group; another finding that is also consistent with the crisis management literature. The president’s ‘outer circle’ remained at the operational level, negotiating with protesters and engaging the local and international media. Within the inner circle, the decision process was informal and the principal players were relied upon for their unwavering loyalty to the president, despite their lack of political skills as many regime insiders criticized.⁴⁹ Oddly, Mubarak neither relied on his veteran political advisors, nor did he form a national security council to deal with the crisis.⁵⁰ Most importantly, the bifurcation of the president’s decision group into its inner and outer circles excluded key actors from crisis

⁴⁹ Mustafa Al Fiqqi, both former secretary and advisor to president Mubarak, argues that Mubarak dismissed his advisors as his health deteriorated and Gamal and his associates began to take over presidential functions and government policymaking.

Mustafa Al Fiqqi. Interview, in ‘Years of Lost Opportunities’ program, *Al Nahar TV*. Cairo, Egypt. March 31, 2012. Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nah-ld1PpQE>

⁵⁰ Egypt did not have a national security council (NSC) at the time of the uprising. Egypt interim President Adly Mansour issued a decree to establish NSC on February 26, 2014.

policy decisions and induced dysfunctional group dynamics, particularly groupthink phenomenon. The size, composition and performance of the inner circle indicated that it sought to maintain consensus and conformity within their broad policy objective; namely, that *the president can and must ride out the crisis*, and sought to exclude alternative and dissenting viewpoints.⁵¹ In fact, the inner circle that exercised policy decisions at the strategic level was unwilling or unable to grasp the severity of the mass unrest since its key players remained both physically and socially distant from the events on the ground. They were convinced that the regime was confronting a security problem rather than a political one and thus refused to believe that the popular demands to dislodge Mubarak from power actually reflected popular will. In this respect, the regime's own relentless media campaign, which described the protesters as terrorists, criminals and foreign agents determined to topple the regime and destroy Egypt, perhaps helped shape the perceptions of Mubarak and those around him; such as in the case of a pathological liar who ultimately falls prey to his own lies.⁵² By contrast, the outer circle who had a better understanding of the gravity of the situation and its potential fallout, remained engrossed in operational matters such as crisis communication and the technicalities of how to implement the president's decisions, and was also too weak, or coy, to influence Mubarak's policy choices. The military mostly stayed on the side as a third party, giving the president the chance to resolve the political crisis and extricate the country from an unprecedented disaster. When the president failed in this attempt, it had to intervene and *ease him out of power* to prevent the escalation of the crisis into a protracted internal conflict; an outcome that has gripped both Syria and Libya since 2011.

⁵¹ Crises are known to heighten the inclination towards conformity in small groups.

Irving Lester Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascos* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982)

⁵² El-Menawi, who was in charge of Egypt State TV and Radio said that during the crisis, "the Presidency hated having to watch the demonstrations on their state TV. Whenever we have it on, I got calls from Anas (the information minister) telling me the palace had called and wanted Tahrir off the screen."

El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak*, p. 170

Chapter 8

International Costs and State Response

Numerous domestic and international factors influence how regimes respond to popular revolts. This chapter will investigate the hypothesis that *at the inception of a crisis, international costs do not influence the government's core crisis policy choices*. Chapter 6 found that the domestic costs (of state repression) had most likely influenced the government's policy choices at the outset of the Egyptian uprising. The task here is to assess whether or not international costs factored in the government decision calculus and if so, to what extent. The underlying assumption is that international pressure is –almost– negligible at the initial stage of a domestic crisis of this sort and that it accrues as a government continues to engage in serious human rights violations against its own civilian population. What constitutes international costs? How did the gradual buildup of international pressure manifest in the Egyptian case? And, to what extent did it influence the crisis' outcomes? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by looking at official statements and analyzing the private exchanges between the US and Egyptian officials.

1. Defining International Costs

When a state exerts pressure through its diplomatic channels to persuade and prod an ally to change its current behavior or comply with a specific demand, such pressure generates *international costs* to the target state.¹ International costs can take several forms such as the

¹ This practice refers to the use of diplomatic leverage among friendly states. This is unlike coercive diplomacy or compellence, which both comprise latent or explicit military threat and are conceptualized to occur among adversaries.

withdrawal of support to the regime's leadership, isolating the target government diplomatically, supporting the demands of the mobilized opposition forces, challenging the target government's narrative in the global media, and the threat to cut economic aid. The objective of these endeavors is for the pressuring state –or a coalition of states– to raise the political costs to the target state for the continued pursuit of a certain domestic policy in defiance of the calls to its cessation by the international community, thereby inducing the target state's leadership to recalculate their options, modify its policy decisions and hence resolve the local conflict or crisis peacefully. To clarify, this research does not look at the success or failure of diplomacy. Rather, its goal is to demonstrate whether or not international pressure was influential in the crisis decision-making process at the outset, and how said pressure gradually accumulated as the crisis unfolded. In this research, international costs specifically refer to the diplomatic pressures and critical public statements designed to influence the crisis policy decisions of the target state.

It is important to stress the following points at the outset. First, while international costs do not necessarily refer to those diplomatic pressures applied by the United States only, statements and prodding by US officials, particularly the US president, seem to carry more moral and political weight than those of any other political figure or entity in the international community. Second, international costs depend on how the target state values its strategic relations with the pressuring state. Since Sadat made his historic shift in Egypt's strategic alliances in the mid-70s, the United States has been a primary benefactor of Egypt: its biggest foreign donor, its key supplier of modern weapons and training and a key strategic ally.

Conversely, the extent to which the pressuring state can 'turn the screws' on the target state depends on the strategic importance of the latter to the former. The United States views Egypt as a pivotal state to regional stability, to the security of Israel, to US interests in the region and also

as a major pillar of moderate Islam. It is for these reasons that while demanding Mubarak implement democratic reforms and improve Egypt's human rights records, successive US Administrations have avoided exerting an overt pressure that would jeopardize the strategic relations with the country. While both countries value their mutual relations, it is without doubt that the US – through diplomatic leverage and inducements – can wield by far the most credible and potent pressure on Egypt than any other state. Therefore, in evaluating international political costs, this research will focus primarily on pressure applied by the US.

2. The Gradual Buildup of International Costs

The United States –along with other Western allies– incrementally imposed politically costly pressures on the Mubarak regime to end the violent repression against protesters and to implement immediate democratic reforms to defuse the crisis. In assessing the buildup of international costs, and how it may have affected the regime's policy choices, the uprising is broken down into three phases.

Phase 1 (Jan. 25-28): Lending Support while Urging Restraint

Like the rest of the world, the enormity of the Tahrir uprising surprised the United States. The Obama administration initially adopted a 'wait and see' approach and as they confronted what was a highly volatile situation they subsequently adjusted their response as they gradually fathomed the gravity of the protests. On January 25, the first US statements lent support to the Mubarak regime as Secretary Clinton urged restraint and declared: "our assessment is that the Egyptian Government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and

interests of the Egyptian people.”² In their memoirs, Secretary of Defense Gates, Secretary of State Clinton and CIA Director Panetta recounted heated debates within the Obama National Security team about how to handle the Egyptian crisis and how to “balance strategic interests against core values?”³ The administration confronted a dilemma in maintaining its credibility and commitments to stand by a longtime and strategic ally while also staying true to its core democratic values as it helped to manage a transition of power that would prevent radical groups from filling in the power vacuum. With these clashing interests, Obama’s administration vacillated on its *first* reaction as it tried to strike the middle ground. Marc Lynch, a leading expert on Arab media and Egyptian politics, remarks that,

The administration’s attempt to straddle its competing commitments inevitably enraged all sides: the Egyptian regime and Arab allies railed against American abandonment, Egyptian protesters and Arab public opinion complained of American indifference, and American critics demanded more vocal leadership.⁴

Cautious statements continued as the pace of change accelerated in Egypt. On January 27, when the media asked Vice president Joe Biden if Mubarak should step down, he said,

No. I think the time has come for President Mubarak to...be responsive to – some – some of the needs of the people out there...Mubarak has been an ally of ours in a number of things...I would not refer to him as a dictator.⁵

On January 28, the bloodiest day in the uprising after which the military was deployed in the streets, the United States called for an end of violence and, soon after Mubarak’s first speech, President Obama began to shift the US’ support more visibly towards the protesters by holding

² ‘US urges restraint in Egypt, Say government stable’ *Reuters*, January 25, 2011.

³ Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014): p. 339

⁴ Marc Lynch ‘America and Egypt after the Uprisings’ *Survival*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 31-42 (April-May 2011): p. 32

⁵ ‘VP Biden Calls Egyptian President Mubarak an “Ally” – and Would Not Call Him a Dictator’ *ABC News*, January 27, 2011

Mubarak to his promises of reforms. On that day, after speaking to Mubarak for approximately 30 minutes, Obama reported: “I told him he has a responsibility to give meaning to those words, to take concrete steps and actions that deliver on that promise.”⁶

Other officials also upped the pressure on the Egyptian regime. Gates called Tantawi and “urged him to ensure that the military would exercise restraint in dealing with the protesters.”⁷ The administration also announced it “would review its assistance posture”⁸ to Egypt, which was later denied by Secretary Clinton who stated that “the U.S. has not warned Egypt that American aid will be cut off.”⁹ In their account of the January 25 uprising, neither the government officials at the time (including foreign minister Abul Gheit) nor sources close to the ruling circle mentioned that diplomatic pressure by the United States, on this phase of the crisis, had any impact on Mubarak’s decisions. In short, the Obama administration’s stance wavered between timid support and calls for restraint and were most likely inconsequential to the regime’s decision calculus at the crisis outset.

Phase 2 (Jan. 29-Feb. 1): Denouncing Violence and Urging Reforms

Several governments around the world issued statements expressing deep concerns for the instability gripping Egypt and called for Mubarak’s government to avoid violence and respond to the demands of protesters. On January 29, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia told President Obama “not to humiliate Mr. Mubarak and warned that he would step in to bankroll Egypt if the US

⁶ ‘President Obama: “This Moment of Volatility Has to be Turned into a Moment of Promise”’ *ABC News*, January 28, 2011

⁷ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoir of a Secretary At War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014): p. 505

⁸ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 1/28/2011. Available from: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/28/press-briefing-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-1282011>

⁹ Hillary R. Clinton in ‘This Week with Christiane Amanpour’ *ABC-TV*, January 30, 2011.

withdrew its aid program.” He also stressed that “the Egyptian president must be allowed to stay on to oversee the transition towards a peaceful democracy and then leave with dignity.”¹⁰ The next day, King Abdullah telephoned and expressed his solidarity with Mubarak and issued a statement denouncing in the strongest terms the attempts to “meddle with the security and stability of Egypt by infiltrators in the name of freedom of expression” and that the Kingdom “stands with all its capabilities with the Egyptian government and its people.”¹¹

Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States, not only backed the Egyptian government, but also exercised their political influence by privately warning about a power void and the potential rise of radical Islamists if Mubarak fell. They called on Washington to tone down both its rhetoric and pressure on Cairo.¹² These calls for caution resonated with the views of many officials in the US administration and perhaps served to moderate the US stance. On the same day, Secretary Clinton appeared on *Meet the Press* and said “we hope to see a peaceful, *orderly* transition to a democratic regime” and recounts in her memoir that “my using the word *orderly* rather than immediate was intentional, although unpopular in some quarters of the White House.”¹³ Following Washington’s cues, the EU member states also called for an “orderly transition in Egypt.”¹⁴

On January 31, and in a new turn of events, Obama dispatched Ambassador Frank Wisner to deliver a private message to Mubarak, that he must transition power “now”. Clinton recounts “Mubarak listened but didn’t give an inch...he was in no way ready to give up his powers.”¹⁵ However, Mubarak offered a reform package in his second speech and thereby, as Gates describes,

¹⁰ Hugh Tomlinson ‘Saudis told Obama not to humiliate Mubarak’ *The Times*, February 10, 2011

¹¹ *Al Sharq Al Awsat* (Arabic), January 30, 2011

¹² Gates, *Duty*, p. 506, 507

¹³ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 341 (emphasis in original)

¹⁴ ‘EU calls for Orderly Transition in Egypt’ *Reuters*, January 31, 2011.

¹⁵ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 342

he essentially “promised to do exactly what the administration had asked him to do through Wisner.”¹⁶ By the time Mubarak delivered his speech on February 1, protesters had further raised their expectations and hence the promised concessions were deemed too little too late. Also, Obama thought the speech was not enough to deal with the escalating crisis and called Mubarak to tell him so.¹⁷ Later that night, president Obama went before the cameras and said:

After his speech tonight, I spoke directly to President Mubarak. He recognizes that the status quo is not sustainable and that a change must take place...Now, it is not the role of any other country to determine Egypt’s leaders. Only the Egyptian people can do that. What is clear –and what I indicated tonight to President Mubarak– is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.¹⁸

The next day when the White House press secretary Robert Gibbs was asked to elaborate on what the president meant by “now”, he said “now means yesterday.”¹⁹ It was clear then that the US’ public statements and private exchanges had an impact on Mubarak’s reform initiatives, but not on the decision to transfer his powers since – as chapter 7 explained – Mubarak’s inner circle determined that the regime could ride out the uprising. Most importantly, while the Egyptian media, along with most Arab media, except Aljazeera, engaged in a concerted campaign of fear mongering, disinformation and conspiracy theories designed to vilify protesters and stigmatize them as terrorists and thugs, the US official statements set the record straight by legitimizing the demands of the protests and calling for Mubarak’s regime to listen to its people. Essentially, the

¹⁶ Gates, *Duty*, p. 505

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt, *White House Press Release*, 02/01/2011.

Before making this speech, Secretary Clinton narrates that when the president was finally determined to throw in his lot with the Tahrir Protests: “We warned that if the President appeared to be too heavy-handed, it might backfire. But other members of the [NSC] team appealed once again to the President’s idealism and argued that events on the ground were moving too quickly for us to wait. He was swayed, and that evening he went before the cameras in the Grand Foyer of the White House.”

Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 343

¹⁹ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, *White House Press Release*, 2/2/2011.

US' public stance –corroborated by numerous media outlets– provided a decisive rebuttal to Mubarak's media claims and allegations, boosted the demonstrators' morale and momentum, and helped frame the narrative in the international news media by depicting the crisis as a popular revolt seeking to topple an entrenched dictator. By now, youth activists in several Arab capitals had begun designating dates to launch copycat protests and in so doing, ushered in a new dawn in the region: the Arab Spring was born.

Phase 3 (Feb. 2-11): Pressing for *Immediate* Transition

The horrific scenes of the Battle of the Camel, in which pro-regime thugs riding horses and camels attacked protesters, shocked the world and marked a turning point in the crisis. After the event, the Obama administration “quickly escalated its pressure on the Egyptian military to begin an immediate transition.”²⁰ Clinton called Suleiman and made it clear “that such violent repression was unacceptable”,²¹ which could partly explain why the government refrained from employing similar tactics until Mubarak resigned. On calls for the transition of power, however, the Foreign Minister Abul Gheit pushed back on the US' attempts at “unceremoniously shoving Mubarak out the door without considering the consequences”²² and issued several statements to the effect that calls by “foreign parties” for a “transitional phase that begins now... is designed to inflame the internal situation.”²³

American and European officials began to ratchet up pressure by condemning the violence committed against demonstrators and journalists and demanding that the perpetrators be held

²⁰ Marc Lynch, *America and Egypt after the Uprisings*, p. 34

²¹ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p.344

²² Ibid

²³ 'Foreign Ministry: Calls for 'transitional phase begins now' unacceptable' *Al Youm* 7, February 2, 2011 (Arabic)

accountable, thereby raising the costs of Egypt's state-sponsored repression. The Obama administration, supported by a bipartisan senate resolution on the matter,²⁴ pushed more openly for an immediate transfer of power by directly discussing a proposal with officials in Cairo whereby Mubarak would resign and Suleiman would head a transitional government with the support of the military.²⁵ The Administration also issued several statements to the effect that the transition of power was a forgone conclusion –but not going as far as saying that Mubarak must go. For example, the US State Department issued a statement hoping “that the next government of Egypt will play a constructive role in the peace process and will recognize the importance of having peaceful relationship with Israel.”²⁶ When Frank Wisner remarked that Mubarak should stay in office to oversee the transition period, the State Department immediately dismissed his views as his own and swiftly denied the suggestions of its sending mixed signals. Several European states offered a combination of incentives and disincentives to prod the Egyptian regime. For example, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered a safe haven for Mubarak,²⁷ while along with France, both suspended arms exports to Egypt.²⁸

By February 9, Suleiman's national dialogue had clearly collapsed. His attempts to send the signal that reforms were underway shattered as millions continued to pour to the streets and all diplomatic efforts aimed at persuading Mubarak to step down had failed. As chapter 7 demonstrated, several officials within the Egyptian regime spent the better part of the uprisings

²⁴ The US Senate passed a resolution calling for Mubarak to transfer his powers to “inclusive, interim caretaker government”. ‘Lawmakers demand Mubarak transfer power in Egypt’ *Reuters*, February 3, 2011

²⁵ Helen Cooper and Mark Landler ‘White House and Egypt Discuss Plan for Mubarak's Exit’ *The New York Times*, February 3, 2011.

²⁶ Philip J. Crowley, Assistant Secretary of State, *Daily Press Briefing*, February 2, 2011.

Similar statements were issued by the White House, for example: “we expect that a government – that whatever government comes next, that the government respects the treaties that it has – that previous Egyptian governments have entered into.” Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 2/2/2011

²⁷ Tony Paterson ‘Germany debates safe haven for Mubarak’ *The Independent*, February 9, 2011

²⁸ ‘UK refuses to suspend Egypt arms sales’ *The Guardian*, February 7, 2011

trying to nudge Mubarak to resign and end the crisis. However, these officials were either unwilling to abandon Mubarak due to their absolute loyalty to him or unable to convince him since they weren't part of his inner circle, which was primarily calling the shots. Having realized that its talks with Egyptians for Mubarak's exit were going nowhere, the Administration further escalated its rhetoric declaring that the government had failed "to meet the minimum threshold for the people of Egypt."²⁹ In response, Abul Gheit lashed out at the United States for "imposing its will" on the Egyptian people.³⁰

By early February 10, US officials were briefed by the Egyptian military that Mubarak would either leave office or turn over his powers to his vice president.³¹ After Mubarak's final and disappointing speech, and by the early hours of February 11, Gates called Tantawi to inquire about the post-speech outcome and the latter responded that Suleiman would "execute all powers as acting president" and preparations were made for Mubarak's departure, possibly to Sharm Al Sheikh.³² When Mubarak was finally eased out of power as the protests boiled over, the Obama administration welcomed the historic move and urged the Egyptian armed forces to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy.

The US-Egyptian military relations proved instrumental in this crisis. Marc Lynch argues that President Obama "played an important role in preventing, through constant, private pressure on the Egyptian Military, the escalation into brutality which later happened in Libya, and also ultimately helped to broker the departure of Mubarak."³³ While the United States gradually

²⁹ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 2/9/2011

³⁰ 'Egypt rejects US advise on reform: foreign minister rejects calls for immediate repeal of emergency law and says US 'imposing its will' on Cairo' *Aljazeera*, February 9, 2011.

³¹ Joby Warrick 'In Mubarak final hours, defiance surprises US and threaten to unleash chaos' *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2011

³² Gates, *Duty*, p. 508

³³ Marc Lynch, *America and Egypt after the Uprisings*, p. 32

increased the pressure it exerted throughout the crisis, it never crossed the line that would ruin its strategic relations with Egypt. Most significantly, the US realized that it could not do more since Mubarak was adamant to stay in power. It was also a deliberate decision by the US administration, as Lynch argues,

[It] recognized the limits to its influence and consciously refrained from attempting to place itself at the center of events. Obama instinctively avoided grandiose rhetoric in favor of specific, concrete efforts to achieve an ‘orderly, meaningful transition’, and consistently put the Egyptian people rather than America at the center of events. Tactically, the administration saw that siding more aggressively with the protesters could backfire by triggering a backlash against America seen as opportunistically claiming a movement not its own, and by hardening the demands of protesters and thus making settlement with the military less likely.³⁴

3. Findings and Conclusion

This chapter sought to assess the proposition that at the outset of a popular revolt international costs play a smaller role in influencing a government’s crisis decisions than do domestic costs. No one expected the January 25th protests to erupt and intensify as they did and the United States was not going to throw Mubarak out while the outlook was still uncertain. Naturally, debates among members of the Obama team on how to respond to a highly volatile crisis while maintaining clashing interests urged cautious response. However, as the mass protests metamorphosed into a revolution, the balance of power tipped in favor of Tahrir Square, and as President Obama ultimately embraced an idealist position, the United States gradually supported the revolutionaries and began to press Mubarak for immediate reforms.

In the initial phase of the crisis, the US’ timid support and calls for both sides to refrain from violence did not likely influence Mubarak’s decisions and course of actions. At the time, the

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 36

US and others believed the protests were another large anti-government demonstration and previous international demands had conditioned Egyptian officials exercise restraint toward the protesters. By the second phase (Jan. 29-Feb.1), the Obama Administration had clearly sided with the protesters' urging Mubarak to implement immediate and genuine reforms and holding him to his word as he spoke to the Egyptian people. While intense diplomatic channels sought to nudge Egyptian officials towards an orderly transition of power, it was the US public statements, along with the media blitzkrieg by Western & Aljazeera outlets, which helped blunt the regime's propaganda and raised the costs of its violent repression. The public position taken by several Western countries, with the United States in the lead, served to inspire dozens of solidarity protests with Tahrir Square in many capitals and shaped the global narrative and debate surrounding the uprising in stark dichotomous terms: authoritarianism vs. democracy, repression vs. peaceful protests. Essentially, by setting who the 'villain' was in this conflict, the protests squarely placed the onus to defuse the crisis on Mubarak. During this period, Mubarak offered a number of reforms in his second speech, and while this could have been by his own volition, it was likely in response to Ambassador Wisner's prodding. In short, the US' diplomatic leverage most likely influenced the regime's position on offering reforms but not on Mubarak's resignation.

During the third phase (Feb. 2-11), in the aftermath of the Battle of the Camel, raging protests and Mubarak's refusal to step down, the United States and other key Western allies upped the ante and coalesced around a Mubarak-must-step-down posture. In addition, the Obama administration continued to condemn state violence, which in turn helped bring closer global media attention to the daily events in Egypt and hence imposed higher political costs on the repression, which most likely induced the regime to curtail its overt abuse of the protesters. However, the US' diplomatic leverage did not exert sufficient pressure to persuade Mubarak to

leave office, and this finding comports with those of the existing literature on international sanctions.³⁵

Finally, US-Egypt military relations and the constant exchanges between the Pentagon and the SCAF helped facilitate the decision for the military to intervene when all else had failed. Thus, when the US clearly withdrew its support from Mubarak, and as the demonstrations developed so rapidly that the people no longer accepted Suleiman as a transitional president, the military removed both from power as it realized that such move was not only welcomed domestically, but internationally, and more specifically, by Egypt's most powerful strategic ally.

³⁵ See for example, Abel Escriba-Folch and Joseph Wright 'Dealing with Tyranny: International Sanctions and the Survival of Authoritarian Rulers' *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 54, Issue 2, pp. 335-359 (June 2010)

Chapter 9

Crisis Management and Strategic Response

Popular revolts pose serious threats to national security particularly in nondemocratic regimes that often lack the institutional means to channel domestic conflicts peacefully. As the case of most ‘Arab Spring’ states, ill-managed crises of contentious collective actions have led to protracted instability, the breakdown of state authority and institutions and, what is worse, to civil wars. Therefore, governments require contingency plans and strategic actions designed to contain and deescalate popular revolts at their outset, to mitigate their negative consequences and to ultimately bring about desirable solutions. This chapter investigates the hypothesis that authoritarian governments are unlikely to prosecute a coherent crisis management strategy while a regime maintains a monopoly over the crisis decision making process at the highest authority levels and pursues short term goals. In exploring the Egyptian government’s crisis management strategy, the chapter will address the following fundamental questions: Did the Egyptian government have a contingency plan for an uprising of this sort? Did the authorities formulate and implement a crisis strategy? If so, what were the elements of this strategy? Did officials adapt their means and goals to changing circumstances?

The study divides this chapter into four parts. The first explores the Egyptian government’s pre-crisis measures, more specifically, its crisis anticipation and contingency plans. Exploring government strategies, short-term as well as long term, follows the planning section. The third part summarizes findings and conclusions.

1. Crisis Planning and Prevention

Governments should prepare for a variety of plausible worst-case scenarios they may encounter so when a crisis hits, officials can swiftly and effectively manage the emergency.¹ The pre-crisis stage, which is often described as the “incubation period”,² comprises both crisis prevention as well as preparatory strategies.³ The former refers to the use of intelligence, surveillance and security arrangements designed to monitor and detect early warning signs of popular mobilization so the political leadership has the opportunity to employ a wide range of preemptive and de-escalatory means before conditions reach crisis proportions. The latter, the preparatory strategies, are the standby plans intended to deal with the crisis when prevention fails. Did the Egyptian government anticipate the protests? Was there a failure in the intelligence gathering? Were there attempts to preempt or contain the looming showdown? Were there preparatory plans in place? This section aims to answer these questions.

In the latter years of Mubarak’s rule, the popular mood grew more cynical as the regime reversed political openings and pressed on its dynastic project, which seemed, at the time, a foregone conclusion. The regime misread the signals of public frustration and long-simmering discontent as those of a collective mood of nonchalance and indifference. For example, in the wake of the November 2010 rigged parliamentary elections, the ruling NDP party officials were basking in their self-delusional victory and political invincibility, refusing to heed the rumblings of a revolution. In sheer hubris, party official Ahmed Ezz, who masterminded the election’s

¹ Most crisis theorists emphasized pre-crisis preparedness. See for example, Ian I. Mitroff and Gus Anagnos, *Managing Crises Before They Happen* (New York: AMACOM Books, 2001); Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding*, 2nd Ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014); Michael Regester and Judy Larkin, *Risk Issues and Crisis Management in Public Relations*, 3rd Ed (London: Cogan Page, 2005)

² Brian A. Turner and Nick Pidgeon, *Man-Made Disasters* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997)

³ See for example, Aaron B. Wildavsky, *Searching for Safety* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988): p.77

outcome, penned several articles in *Al Ahram* newspaper extolling the regime's impressive economic growth, increasing wealth and growing (and for Egypt, unprecedented) social freedoms.⁴ Another official and political scientist, Ali al Din Hilal, reportedly commented to US diplomats that "widespread, politically motivated unrest was unlikely because it was not part of the Egyptian mentality".⁵ More crucially, spy chief Omar Suleiman boasted to visiting US officials a few days before the uprisings, that even if a large number of protesters turned to the streets, the situation would not be like Tunis since "[t]he police have a strategy and the president is not weak."⁶ Even President Mubarak publicly belittled the protests following the rigged elections.⁷ In fact, the confidence that President Mubarak and his inner circle conveyed led others within the regime itself to further dismiss signs of impending threats. Aly recounts:

In the ten days before the revolution, I met with President Mubarak on three occasions. On all of these occasions, Mubarak did not seem worried about the increasing political turmoil, leading me to play down its significance... During my meetings with President Mubarak, he and the strategic elite were on all three occasions extremely relaxed, which undoubtedly influenced my perceptions. Beyond that, their demeanor was indicative of the general unexpectedness of the revolution.⁸

While government officials issued reassuring statements as the popular revolt drew closer, Egyptian intelligence reports allegedly warned that "prevailing conditions in the region point to serious dangers that could threaten the stability of all Arab states." These reports also recommended the government implement several measures, including "not lifting government subsidies on basic food items, fuel and service fees"; that "the police forces should exercise

⁴ See for Example: 'Ahmed Ezz Writes for Al Ahram Again' *Egyptian Chronicles*, December 23, 2010.

⁵ Quoted in Mona El Ghobashy 'The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution' in *The Journey to Tahrir*, p.23

⁶ Quoted in, Steve A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p.282

⁷ Mubarak disparagingly commented "let them have fun"

Mahmoud Mosalem "Mubarak mocks opposition's proposed shadow parliament" *Egypt Independent*, December 12, 2010.

⁸ Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 4-5

restraint in dealing with social protests to minimize clashes” and finally, “appointing a vice president to assuage popular fears over the country’s political future and dispel widespread speculations about potential political void or the hereditary project.”⁹

The political authority, however, ignored the aforementioned intelligence warnings for several reasons. First, following Ben Ali’s overthrow, Mubarak met with his top advisors, and they “collectively agreed that Egypt was not Tunisia, and that such a development was unlikely”¹⁰ they thereby closed their eyes to a valuable teachable moment. Second, while Suleiman’s intelligence agency estimated that the January 25th protests would witness the gathering of up to a hundred thousand activists, the Ministry of Interior believed the crowds would be around twenty thousand.¹¹ Since the latter had been in firm control of the streets and well versed in the art of suppressing civil unrest, the Palace and the cabinet assessed the Ministry’s number as accurate.¹² Therefore, when Suleiman informed Mubarak on January 20th of his intelligence assessment, the president downplayed the threats and delegated the prime minister to hold a meeting and determine what should be the government’s strategy.

Third, because authoritarian leaders often surround themselves with obsequious toadies who rarely criticize or correct their superiors on critical policy matters, they foster a sycophantic culture that ultimately blocks or impedes the flow of accurate information to the top leadership.¹³ As emphasized by all sources close to the regime, the mentality of ‘yes sir, everything is under

⁹ Quoted in Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule*, p.24-25

¹⁰ Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 39

¹¹ See for example: Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak’s Rule*, p.6

¹² Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 39

¹³ Alaa Al Aswany, a renowned Egyptian writer, argues that “The way officials are appointed in Egypt automatically rules out qualified people, natural leaders, those who have self-respect, and those who care about their dignity, while official positions are usually given to losers, partisans, sycophants, and those who cooperate with the security agency. This has brought conditions in Egypt to rock bottom in most fields.”

Alaa Al Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What Made the Revolution Inevitable* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011): p. 14

control' was clearly at work within Egyptian politics and had devastating consequences on its crisis management. El-Menawi argues that:

Even when they spoke to the President to tell him what was going on, they always gave the impression that they had more control over Egypt than they really did. This has been going on for years. They never wanted to disturb the President, they wouldn't give him the bad news, they wouldn't pressure him, and they would always try and sort out problems before they went to him.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Hossam Badrawi, the newly appointed NDP Secretary General, met Mubarak several times and found him, as Aly describes, "ill-informed about the realities in the street". He further comments:

This was partially the result of Mubarak's subordinates' reluctance to provide him with seemingly negative information, on account of his age and poor health. Whatever its source, this lack of information undoubtedly contributed to the President's inability to make critical decisions.¹⁵

By January 26, clashes spread nationwide and the uprising was in full swing. El-Menawi recounts,

I got wind from the palace that the governor of Suez called the President, reporting on what was going on. He told Mubarak that everything was under control, and not to worry. I knew this wasn't true. This was completely at odds with all the reports of trouble we were getting from the ground.¹⁶

Failure to inform the president of the reality and gravity of the protests was a major mistake that led to flawed assessments of the crisis and subsequent delays and rendered the responses as inadequate. In short, the government neither anticipated the uprisings nor sought to assuage the public outrage that reached fever pitch with the confluence of multiple highly disruptive events.

¹⁴ Abdel Latif El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak*, p. 66

¹⁵ Abdel Monem Said Aly, *State and Revolution in Egypt*, p. 39

¹⁶ Abdel Latif El-Menawi, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak*, p. 89

The failure in crisis anticipation and prevention can be attributed to a failure in intelligence gathering, and more specifically, a failure in the process of intelligence dissemination to decision makers by conformist officials unwilling or unable to disabuse the political leadership of their fantasies and press the case that ‘Egypt *was* like Tunis’.

Of course, this would have been a daunting task in a political culture that equates dissent with disloyalty, especially during times of national emergency. However, there was also a failure on the part of the president and his most trusted advisors who, possibly due to cognitive dissonance, accepted the intelligence reports that reinforced their existing beliefs of being in control and ignored information that may have caused them discomfort. As such, a top-down posture of overconfidence undermined the bottom-up flow of warnings of imminent danger, which reinforced a false sense of invulnerability and risk-taking behavior.

On January 25th, the unprecedented numbers of protesters who turned to the streets took the government by surprise. Less than a week earlier, the cabinet had designated the Interior Ministry to handle the protests. As mentioned in previous chapters, the police forces established an emergency operations center and engaged the protesters in accordance with their standard procedures until their forces collapsed out of exhaustion. During this initial period of the unrest, the Ministry of Interior made crisis management decisions and directed operations at their level, rather than at the cabinet level, providing a clear indication that the government had underestimated the urgency and enormity of the popular mobilization.

In essence, the popular revolt was a classic ‘black swan’: a highly unpredictable event beyond the realm of the regime’s expectations since it had never happened before. Barriers to collective action in Egypt had been until then, insurmountable – weak opposition, robust and loyal security apparatus, potent intelligence services, entrenched authoritarian culture, solid support base

within the population, coopted religious institutions and firm control of state organs. Relying on history, the regime had decisively suppressed every protest. When the government ordered the military to intervene, the armed forces carried out their contingency plans for a national emergency, deploying assets to protect vital installations and critical infrastructures.¹⁷ Throughout the uprising, the government did not form a crisis group at the national level and there were no preplanned strategies to address the popular unrest. Rather, crisis decision making immediately contracted to Mubarak's inner circle whose policy choices reflected their general state of confusion and disarray and an obstinate resistance to see the crisis for what it really was – a truly popular revolution.

2. Crisis Strategy Implementation and Adaptation

Popular unrest can challenge the most robust authoritarian governments. Uprisings can cause systemic shocks, set in motion knock-on effects and expose to the surface structural vulnerabilities, threatening both national stability and the survival of a political regime. Therefore, governments must develop strategies designed to mitigate crisis impact and seek a return to normalcy. By definition, a crisis is a highly complex emergency, involving volatile and fluid events, and hence flexibility should be at the heart of crisis management strategies. Put simply, *governments must adapt their strategic means and goals* as they confront various inhibiting factors such as reduced capacity to deal with protests, shifts in popular opinion and the escalation of unrest

¹⁷ William Dobson interviewed a former Egyptian officer who argued that the military had in place a “Strategic Points Defensive Plan” designed to deal with a popular insurrection. William J. Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve* (New York: Doubleday, 2012): p. 214-215

to unprecedented levels. Maintaining resilience in the face of crisis is at the core of good governance.¹⁸

How policy makers assess and frame a crisis affects the strategies they formulate and implement to deal with the contingency. By January 28th, the regime had split into two groups that possessed decisional power: Mubarak and his inner clique and the military. The former group did not articulate clear and well-structured crisis strategies in the traditional sense (i.e., by evaluating threats, setting realistic and attainable goals, prioritizing short/long term goals, aligning goals with means, articulating actionable content, adapting strategy to changing circumstances, maintaining stakeholders' support...etc.).

Rather, Mubarak and those around him considered the uprising a security problem all throughout the crisis and hence adopted a security-first approach with the single-minded pursuit of maintaining the president's political survival regardless of the consequences. Faulty classification of the crisis prompted the use of flawed policy measures and a growing gap between objectives and the means to achieve them. Tragically, the president's group found itself in a hole, which it continued digging, muddling through one policy disaster to another and thus failing to reassess and adjust their course of action based on new developments on the ground. Abdel-Kader Shohaib argues,

The [president's] crisis group was in a state of confusion and struggled to take the necessary decisions. They sought to manage the crisis by offering the least concessions and maintaining minimal losses hoping that once the regime overcomes the crisis, it would attack those who participated in the protests and demanded its overthrow.¹⁹

¹⁸ Resilience here is defined as the ability of the government to navigate the crisis, recover from its negative effects, and return to normal functions while preserving its core interests and functions through efficient and timely policy measures.

¹⁹ Abdel-Kader Shohaib, *The Last Hours in Mubarak's Rule*, p. 32

Two examples are illustrative of how Mubarak's inner circle failed to adapt to the unfolding events. First, at the behest of the Palace, the government launched a propaganda campaign using the familiar tools of conspiracy theories and demagoguery aimed at demonizing the protesters and "terrorizing ordinary Egyptians into staying at home and off the streets."²⁰ The government also refused to allow the media to interview protesters and instead broadcasted national songs that exalted the president and his achievements.²¹ This policy remained unchanged throughout much of the crisis with devastating consequences. It infuriated demonstrators who then turned to Aljazeera channel, a foreign station whose coverage supported the overthrow of Mubarak.²²

To the horror of the regime, Aljazeera played a detrimental role enflaming the crisis in Egypt by giving an international platform to hardline protest leaders. In addition, media access allowed protest leaders to coordinate sit-ins in Egyptian streets and to make unsubstantiated claims against the regime (such as, Mubarak's wealth estimated at \$70 billion) that reverberated throughout the international community. The intense media coverage transfixed viewers to the TV screens, which lent global solidarity to the protesters and inspired regional revolutionary sentiments. Therefore, as the state media lost credibility, this loss alienated many Egyptians, and opened the door for a foreign media channel – perhaps with an agenda – to be the trusted source for reporting. This collapse of confidence in the government further weakened the regime's capacity to keep things under control in the streets. In addition, despite the negative popular reaction to Mubarak's first speech, the president maintained the same tone and theme in his latter

²⁰ Hugh Miles 'The Aljazeera Effect' *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2011

²¹ Abdel Latif El-Menawi. Interview, in "Special Interview" Program, Part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. February 5, 2012. (Arabic)

²² Egyptian-Qatari relations were strained since Qatar, in the last decade, had hosted many anti-Mubarak opposition figures who lambasted Mubarak's regime in Aljazeera channel. Also, through its soft power and vast wealth, Doha had become the political capital of the Arab world at the time, replacing Egypt, the traditional heavyweight.

speeches, which all gave the impression of an out-of-touch, conceited, and evasive president. This declining credibility is further indication that Mubarak's circle never adjusted their crisis communication strategy.

Second, despite the shift in popular opinion against the regime in the wake of the Battle of the Camel, Mubarak's civilian coalition continued to employ the *baltagiya*, or goons, which further enflamed national sentiments and bolstered protesters' determination to dislodge Mubarak from power. The president's inner circle continued to cling to its original goal and means despite mounting evidence that the former was no longer reachable and the latter tools counterproductive.

Uncertainty, incomplete information, high stakes, time pressures and stress are conditions that can impair a policymaker's capacity to analyze a problem adequately, to assess the alternatives and to adapt to new developments. Such conditions increase the risk of miscalculation, or to succumb to the use of lessons drawn from past experiences; i.e., the use of analogical reasoning,²³ or to obsessively focus on one goal and a particular way to achieve it; i.e., engage in 'dominant goal-means schemata'.²⁴ It is also plausible that Mubarak's paralysis was the result of an escalating commitment; i.e., an entrapment, where he adhered to one course of action with increasing insistence given that his regime had already invested substantial political capital in repression and hence it would need to account for the sunk costs.

As for the military establishment, the widespread protests astounded its top commanders. However, the pre-existing fissures between the military and Mubarak's civilian coalition most likely helped clarify to senior officers the stance they should take at the crisis outset, and more

²³ See for example, Richard E. Neustadt, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2011).

²⁴ Paul 't Hart, *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failures* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1994)

specifically, what *not* to do. While the military has been a primary constituent of the regime, the regime relegated it to the background during the last decade in favor of Gamal and company. As a result, analysts can divide the crisis in military strategy into two periods: The first encompasses the 18-day uprising, and the second the post-Mubarak transitional period (2011-2013).

Military Strategy During the 18-day Uprising

The military was well aware of the popular rejection of Gamal's presidential scheme, Mubarak's deteriorating health and the political uncertainty looming on the horizon. The SCAF, which comprised twenty senior officers that included the defense minister, his top assistants, chief of staff and heads of services, convened several meetings in 2010 to discuss military options to a variety of worse case scenarios, including the possibility of erupting mass revolts following Gamal's election to the presidency come September 2011. If such event occurred, the senior leadership agreed that "it would not intervene in this battle" since this would drag the Armed Forces in endless internal partisan fights that would damage its standing and legitimacy.²⁵ By the afternoon of January 28th, the military forces were in control of the streets and their immediate strategy focused on containing the protests and reestablishing stability without the use of military force.²⁶ Cook argues that the fact that "the [military] commanders were insulated from the opposition to Mubarak, his son, the National Democratic Party, and the government...placed them in the position to be the saviors [of the regime] without risking a split within the ranks."²⁷ Their

²⁵ 'Haykal: Sisi refused to protect the heir apparent Gamal Mubarak' *El Bashayer*, January 3, 2014. (Arabic)
See also, Richard Spencer 'How Sisi plotted to save army rule even while Hosni Mubarak was in Power' *The Telegraph*, June 1, 2014.

²⁶ Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, p. 286

²⁷ Ibid

overall strategy focused on preserving the current regime, of which the military was and is a core constituent and primary beneficiary.

Throughout the crisis, the SCAF maintained its strategic objective, but also modified its tactics in the wake of unanticipated events. During the first week of the uprising, “the commanders worked to salvage Mubarak and the political order” through means that included the attempt to intimidate demonstrators by a show of force (flying F-16s over Tahrir Square), restricting the number of protesters going through their checkpoints, issuing a public statement supporting the protesters’ demands for Mubarak to offer credible political concessions and by calling on the protesters to disband since their demands had been heard; all efforts designed to defuse the showdown.²⁸

While the military refrained from using force, its soldiers sat awaiting the outcome as the police, thugs and intelligence personnel attacked, arrested and killed or tortured thousands of demonstrators in public squares. By the second week, and especially after the Battle of the Camel, the military waited for diplomacy to play out as officials within the regime and the American Administration tried to nudge Mubarak to transfer his powers to Suleiman and thus defuse the escalating crisis. At the time, the SCAF soon realized that the public did not wish to break the state and its institutions: rather, they sought to “wrest control of the state apparatus from the Mubarak regime. From a Leninist perspective, the Egyptian insurrection sought to do the most *un*-revolutionary thing – allow a new class to govern with the old state machinery; not destroy the

²⁸ Ibid, p. 287-288

state, but transfer its proprietorship.”²⁹ However, the president’s intransigence was increasingly redirecting the popular wrath at the entire political order.

By the third week, Suleiman’s strategy to drive a wedge into the ranks of the opposition leaders and wait out the uprising had clearly failed; his national dialogue collapsed and the protests were spreading nationwide. By February 10, the military got word that Mubarak had finally been convinced to transfer all his powers to Vice President Suleiman, prompting military commander, Gen. Hassan Al Roueini, to tell protesters who were waiting in Tahrir Square for Mubarak’s third speech that “all your demands will be met today”.³⁰ Egyptian officials also reassured their American counterparts of the coming breakthrough, and this led Leon Panetta, Director of the CIA at the time, to inform lawmakers “there is a strong likelihood that Mubarak may step down this evening.”³¹ However, Mubarak’s refusal to step down placed Egypt’s stability and the survival of the political system in jeopardy. By February 11, the SCAF had to intervene and ease Mubarak away from power. Mohamed Mahsoub, a former Egyptian minister, argues:

If Mubarak was not removed from power at the time and protests continued to boil over, it would have had raised the popular demands to change the whole regime... The military coup was designed to prevent the protests from evolving into an all sweeping revolution... At the time, however, because of the euphoria surrounding Mubarak’s ouster, most people did not realize that what happened was a military coup.³²

²⁹ Dan Tschirgi, Walid Kazziha and Sean McMahon eds., *Egypt’s Tahrir Revolution* (Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013): p. 6

³⁰ Anthony Shadid ‘Mubarak refuses to step down, stoking revolt’s fury and resolve’ *The New York Times*, February 10, 2011

³¹ William Branigin and Greg Miller ‘CIA director cites ‘likelihood’ that Mubarak may step down’ *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2010

³² Mohamed Mahsoub. Interview, in ‘a Witness to a History’ program, *Aljazeera Channel*, episode 1. Doha, Qatar. January 26, 2014 (Arabic)

By pushing the president from power, the military saved the regime from its worst offenders; i.e., Mubarak and his clique, who, having lost legitimacy, threatened to bring the entire political edifice down. Ultimately, the military strategy prevented what was a revolutionary situation from producing a revolutionary outcome; that is to say, the acquisition and control of state institutions by the revolutionaries.³³ In the final calculus, the January 25th revolution overthrew the ruling family and its project to bequeath the presidency to Gamal and thus, it rid the regime of its greatest liabilities. In short, the military maintained its objective of containing the protests and preserving the political survival of the regime throughout the crisis; however, it adapted its measures as they confronted unforeseeable developments. The means to achieve their goals ran the gamut from attempting to save Mubarak during the early days of protests while this still seemed feasible, to dislodging him from power when circumstances necessitated his ouster.

Military Strategy during the Transitional Period

The crisis did not end with the departure of Mubarak and the SCAF, now at the helm, had to bring stability to a country battered by revolutionary upheaval. In its quest to navigate the unknown terrain of a politically awaked populace, the pervasive revolutionary fervor and the popular demands for a democratic transition, the military sought to achieve two key objectives: To restore stability to Egypt and to preserve a political order that protected the military's prerogatives and vast economic interests. One can divide the transitional period into three phases: The SCAF-

³³ Charles Tilly describes a successful revolution as having both a *revolutionary situation* as well as a *revolutionary outcome*. In the former, a significant segment of society makes a competing claim to control the state whereby the state is incapable of suppressing such claims. The latter occurs when the revolutionary coalition actually succeeds in controlling state institutions through neutralizing or acquiring of the military and security forces. Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006): p. 159

led government, the Morsi Presidency and the Counter Revolution and, finally, the Restoration of the Ancien Régime.

1. The SCAF-led Government

Unlike Tunis where the political forces spearheaded the democratic transition process, the SCAF was determined to exercise control over all aspects of the political transition. They dismissed popular demands to hand over authority to a civilian national unity government led by ElBaradei, and assumed both executive and legislative powers to ensure that its objectives were met. To bring calm and order, the military enacted several measures to assuage popular concerns over Egypt's political future: it dissolved the parliaments, suspended the constitution, issued a constitutional declaration and charted a roadmap and timeline for the transition to civilian rule.

The military council also moved quickly to deal with the most challenging problem to domestic stability: continuing mass mobilization. To do so, the council sought to channel the widespread contentious collective action into institutional political processes of party formation, political organizing and electioneering. Shortly, Egypt had over fifty official political parties, which were soon engrossed in the chicken-egg question facing any transitional democracy: which comes first, the constitution or elections? This was a clever tactical move designed to transform what the protesters called "street legitimacy"; i.e., legitimacy conferred by the revolution, into democratic legitimacy through the ballot boxes.³⁴ This move also sought to demobilize popular activism by attempting to create a fault line among the revolutionaries by severing the horizontal

³⁴ Azmi Bishara 'Revolution against Revolution, the Street against the People, and Counter-Revolution' *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, Doha, September 2013, p. 2

The process of transforming "street legitimacy" into "people's legitimacy" would be reversed to dislodge the democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, when the country seemed to teeter on the brink of civil war.

links that united them under the common group identity and solidarity that helped trigger the uprising in the first place.³⁵

However, widespread frustration with the military's political leadership, its military trials, repression of protesters, reluctance to implement reforms and rapidly crumbling economy sustained protest movements and sit-ins across the country. The barrier of fear of the state had been broken and people were directly defying practices of political control through efforts of collective assertiveness that continued to choke public life, repel tourism and foreign investments, and, devastate the national economy. In short, the military was able to *divide* but neither *conquer* nor *appease* the revolutionary groups, and hence, it failed to restore stability throughout the transitional period.

When the nation held parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood secured majority seats in both the lower and upper houses and this, after having declared that they would not field a presidential candidate. As many observers argued, the Brotherhood, or its newly formed Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) seemed to be willing to strike a power sharing deal with the SCAF. This arrangement would allow the Brotherhood to assume a role in government given its landslide electoral victories. At the same time, the SCAF would maintain its exceptional constitutional status (immunity, autonomy and enormous role in the national economy, society and politics), which constituted its core strategic objective.³⁶ In fact, allegations of the FJP colluding with the military intensified when the Brotherhood initially refrained from criticizing the SCAF and refused

³⁵ The literature on social movements posits that group identity and solidarity are important catalysts in fomenting group coherence and establishing the horizontal links necessary to the formation of collective action.

See for example, Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) and, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani *Social Movements: An introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006)

³⁶ See for example, Sherif Tarek 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Ruling Military: Deal or no Deal?' *ahram online*, September 28, 2011; Leila Fadel, 'Muslim Brotherhood asserts its strength in Egypt with challenges to military' *Washington Post*, March 25, 2012; Eric Trager 'No Brothers in Arms in Egypt' *Foreign Affairs*, April 12, 2012

to join several large anti-military rule protests.³⁷ What others saw as duplicitous behavior on the part of the Brotherhood, the military saw as pragmatism. It was believed that the Brotherhood's organizational capacity, electoral success, popular support and their message of moral reforms would serve as a stabilizing force in Egypt. In addition, Western powers were willing, albeit grudgingly, to accept an Islamist government in the hopes that they would be a force for moderation and that they would invest in stabilizing a region marred by religious extremism.

When the Brotherhood realized that their Islamist-led parliaments had little legislative authority and that there were concerted attempts by the military designed to deny them the fruits of their electoral victories, they reneged on their earlier promise and nominated not one, but two candidates for the presidential elections.³⁸ As Bishara explains, "This was a dangerous decision that indicated a desire to rule the state by themselves...The Brotherhood decided to govern the state alone during the most critical phase of Egypt's history."³⁹ What seemed to be a military-brotherhood rapprochement for mutual gains soon descended into acrimony and preemptive actions. In the final round of the presidential elections, Morsi threatened to launch a revolution (read: civil war) if the elections were rigged.⁴⁰ The SCAF moved quickly few days before the government announced election results and dissolved the democratically elected parliament, stripped the presidency of many of its powers and reinstated martial law.

³⁷ Many Egyptians have accused the Muslim Brotherhood of abandoning the protesters in the violent dispersals at both Maspero (October, 2011) and Mohammed Mahmoud (November, 2011) for political expediency. Many would later say with a sense of vengeance to the Brotherhood 'you sold us out at Maspero (massacre) and we sold you out at Rabaa massacre'. See for example: Bilal Fadl 'Understanding Mohamed Mahmoud' *al Araby*, November 22, 2014.

³⁸ Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): p.151-152

³⁹ Azmi Bishara, *Revolution against Revolution*, p. 22

⁴⁰ 'Morsi threatens to launch a revolution if presidential election results are rigged' *Aljazeera*, June 15, 2012 (Arabic).

Yezid Sayigh, a senior associate at the Carnegie Center and an expert on security sector reform in the Arab world, comments that the SCAF

...was also unable to envisage, let alone initiate, any policy requiring substantive reform or structural change, which it regarded as inherently threatening. Quite the contrary, when faced with an unfamiliar and unnerving transitional process, the SCAF fell back on its paternalistic values and authoritarian legacy, reacting conservatively and increasingly defensively whenever it felt that its status or core interests were being directly challenged.⁴¹

In short, the military council monopolized the political transition process, failed to effect necessary reforms and torpedoed popular achievements by, for instance, curtailing the elected parliament from playing the role the public, and particularly the Islamists, hoped it would. These measures fueled popular anger and disillusionment and prompted the Brotherhood to enter the presidential elections, thereby pushing Egypt into the political unknown. During this period, the SCAF was able to achieve its strategic goal of maintaining its institutional interests but failed to restore domestic stability and peace.

2. Morsi's Presidency and the Counter Revolution

President Morsi confronted tremendous obstacles from the very beginning of his presidency. He faced political forces determined to play spoiler, while state institutions (military, police, judiciary and the vast bureaucracy, which are often dubbed the 'deep state') refused to cooperate with him and resisted his policies at every turn, rendering his government dysfunctional from the outset.⁴² In addition, Morsi exercised unilateral and exclusionary politics that further

⁴¹ Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State*, p. 8

⁴² Azmi Bishara, *Revolution against revolution*, p. 23

alienated his political rivals and reinforced public fears of authoritarian rule and Islamist social engineering. Michael Hanna, a fellow at the Century Foundation and expert on Egyptian politics, puts it succinctly stating,

despite inheriting intractable political, economic and social problems, when Morsi ascended to power on June 30, 2012, he had choices – and he chose factional gain, zero-sum politics, and populist demagoguery... those choices generated increasing levels of polarization, destroying trust and crippling the state.⁴³

The mainstream discourse post the January 25th revolution revolved around class politics, social equality and the process of democratic transition, but when the Brotherhood came to power, the debate veered dangerously towards ideology and political identity. Divergent ideological views and positions on Islamism and secularism hardened as the competition over power intensified and the mistrust among political factions deepened. These ideological confrontations and irreconcilable divisions bifurcated Egyptian society and threatened to tear asunder its social fabric. In addition, with the Brotherhood in power, Egypt's relations with key allies such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE had deteriorated and threatened to completely alienate Egypt from strategic and traditional partners, minimize its leadership role and political influence, and most importantly, sever significant financial lifelines from its failing economy.

These challenges posed serious risks to Egypt's national interests and, coupled with Morsi's incompetent government and pervasive ideological rhetoric, threatened to further destabilize the country and erode Egypt's mostly homogenous and tolerant society. Together, these challenges helped liberal forces, state institutions and remnants of the Mubarak regime coalesce into a united anti-Brotherhood coalition. This coalition midwived and bankrolled a rebellious

⁴³ Michael Wahid Hanna 'How to Wreck a country in 369 days' *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2013.

grassroots movement, *Tamarod*, which, by April 2012, claimed to have gathered more than 22 million signatures demanding early presidential elections and designated July 2 as the date to launch mass protests, if Morsi refused to step down.⁴⁴

By December, 2012, President Morsi had implemented measures that triggered a relentless wave of public protests that continued to shatter the economy, led to a growing disillusionment among the public and gave the state media apparatus tremendous stories to prop up anti-Brotherhood hysteria. For instance, he issued a decree granting himself sweeping powers and immunized his decisions from judicial reviews. In addition, his government not only monopolized the drafting of the constitution but also rushed it for a referendum (approved by a low voter turnout) and pardoned 17 Islamist militants who were part of an insurgency that carried attacks against soldiers in the 1990s. All these events, and more, paralyzed the state and put Egypt on the cusp of a violent domestic conflict.

For the SCAF, while the 2012 constitution maintained the military's prerogatives (enshrining its independence and autonomy and also shielding its budget from legislative oversight) the Brotherhood had destabilized the country. By early 2013, the military shrewdly assumed the role of a mediator between Morsi's government and their political rivals who by then had coalesced into the National Salvation Front (NSF). Defense Minister Sisi issued a series of warnings for the political factions to resolve the bitter political impasse, and while Morsi convened several 'national dialogues' both parties were unwilling to compromise.

By April 2013, Morsi had lost much of 'street support' and his government grew weaker and more isolated as the balance of power rapidly shifted in favor of his political rivals. By setting

⁴⁴ See for example: Asma Al Sharif and Yasmine Saleh 'Special Report: The Real Force behind Egypt's Revolution of the State' *Reuters*, October 10, 2013.

political differences aside, the NSF had joined forces with the *Tamarod* movement and members of the old regime to form a formidable coalition, a *counter-revolutionary* force,⁴⁵ determined to bring down the Muslim Brotherhood's government even at the cost of derailing the democratic process.⁴⁶ Rumors spread of an impending military coup as criticism of the SCAF grew for having allowed the Brotherhood to ascend to power.⁴⁷ As the nationwide protests of June 30, 2013 drew closer, General Sisi issued an ultimatum threatening to impose a military roadmap for a new transition if the political parties could not settle their deadlock. Morsi refused to budge, thereby rendering the military intervention inevitable, or as many Egyptians depict it: as a 'popularly legitimate coup'. Ultimately, the military had to take over power due to a failure of the entire body politic in Egypt and to the political forces that placed their own interests to that of the nation.

In short, with a sense of *déjà vu*, the military was back at the yoke of power, albeit with a civilian façade. During Morsi's presidency, the military council maintained its special status in the Islamist-drafted constitution, however, Egypt slid further into instability and chaos. While the military intervened to avert a potential civil war, it did so mostly to preserve its own parochial institutional interests or the "officers' republic"; i.e., "the self-perpetuating military networks that permeate virtually all branches and levels of state administration and of the state-owned sectors of

⁴⁵ Tarek Masoud, Harvard professor and expert on Egyptian politics argues that 'June 30 was less of a revolution than a counter-revolution, carried out not by the photogenic young people who made Tahrir Square a household name two-and-a-half-years ago, but by the orphans of the regime that those young people had overthrown'
Tarek Masoud 'How Morsi Could have Saved Himself' *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2013

⁴⁶ Azmi Bishara, *Revolution against Revolution*, p. 3

⁴⁷ A Gallup poll taken a few weeks before deposing Morsi found that approximately 80% of Egyptians felt that their country was in a worse position and that the economy was deteriorating; and that confidence in national government dropped from 57% in November, 2012 to 29% in June, 2013.

'Egyptian views of government crashed before overthrow' *Gallup*, August 2, 2013. Available from:
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/163796/egyptian-views-government-crashed-overthrow.aspx>

the economy”.⁴⁸ Yezid Sayigh presciently concluded in August 2012, almost a year before Morsi’s overthrow, that

Unless the Officers’ republic is dismantled, it will use its extensive political reach and its control over key bureaucratic and economic enclaves to block the exercise of power by Morsi or any president after him and to subvert any future government of which it disapproves.⁴⁹

3. Restoration of the *Ancien Régime*

Following Morsi’s ouster, the military-backed government moved to disperse a large Brotherhood-led sit-in at Rabaa Square. The government initially attempted to settle the conflict through peaceful means and sought the mediation of diplomats from the United States, the EU and Arab Gulf states. However,

[b]y early August, the hardliners had won out, and the transitional government ceased any more talk of reconciliation. Instead, the government began describing Rabaa as a den of violent terrorists bent on overthrowing the state. Egypt would not ignore the protests or negotiate with its leaders, but would treat it as an insurgency and fight with full force.⁵⁰

This is also corroborated by Mohamed El Baradei, who was then Egypt’s vice president and resigned in protests as the military-backed government decided to end the protests violently.⁵¹ The shocking brutality of the massacre at Rabaa, the subsequent crackdown on dissent and the return of the security state with gusto has since pushed Egypt in a downward spiral of internal conflict as evidenced by an upsurge in targeted attacks and acts of sabotage against military

⁴⁸ Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State*, p. 8

⁴⁹ Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State*, p. 3

⁵⁰ Thanassis Cambanis “The Final Betrayal of Egypt’s Revolution” *Foreign Policy*, January 23, 2015.

⁵¹ see for example, Jeffrey Fleishman ‘Egypt’s VP Mohamed ElBaradei resigns in protest against crackdown’ *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2013

personnel and state infrastructures. Michel Dunne and Scott Williamson, Carnegie scholars, report that “in the first seven months following Morsi’s ouster, the pace of terrorism-related deaths in Egypt surpassed the worst years of the 1990s” and the numbers of those wounded and arrested “exceed those seen even in Egypt’s darkest periods since the 1952 military-led revolution.”⁵² This violence also contributed to solidify domestic schisms and discords; a prospect that, ironically, the SCAF had initially sought to avert by removing Morsi from power. In describing Egypt’s current state, Thanassis Cambanis, a journalist, Century Foundation fellow and author of *An Egyptian Story: Once upon a Revolution*, reports,

...so far, the core grievances that drew frustrated Egyptians to Tahrir Square in the first place remain unaddressed. Police operate with complete impunity and disrespect for citizens, routinely using torture. Courts are whimsical, uneven, at times absurdly unjust and capricious. The military controls a state within a state, removed from any oversight or scrutiny, with authority over vast portion of the national economy and Egypt’s public land. Poverty and unemployment continue to rise, while crises in housing, education and health care have grown even worse than the most dire predictions of development experts. Corruption has largely gone unpunished, and Sisi has begun to roll back an initial wave of prosecutions against Mubarak, his sons, and his oligarchs.⁵³

In short, since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013, the Military Council redrafted the constitution, consolidated its powers over the state and catapulted one of its own into the presidency, thereby achieving the core strategic objectives of expanding its role, status and privileges. However, the strategic goal of restoring stability remains elusive at best and Egypt is still a divided nation teetering on the brink of disaster. In fact, Egypt’s overall trend in the Fragile States index shows steady deterioration, particularly in the last three years.

⁵² Michele Dunne and Scott Williamson ‘Egypt’s Unprecedented Instability by the Numbers’ *Carnegie Center*, March 24, 2014.

⁵³ Thanassis Cambanis ‘Is Egypt on the Verge of Another Revolution?’ *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2015.

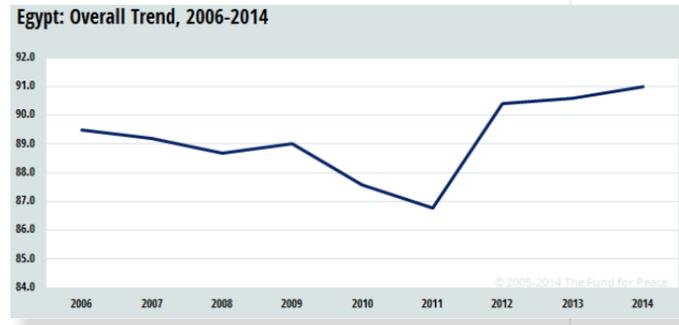


Figure-7: Fragile States Index Scores for Egypt (2006-2014)

Upward movement represents worsening trends.

(Photo: from Global Fund for Peace)

The current government's strategy to restore stability has focused on deterring activism or raising the costs of collective action; i.e., re-instilling fear through brute force, lengthy jail terms and awful prison conditions, promulgating restrictive laws such as banning protests and demonizing opponents in a state-led hyper-nationalist discourse. A strategy premised on the assumption that doubling down on repression would engender domestic peace and quietude demonstrates the sheer lack of political learning and the unwillingness, or inability, to understand the root causes of the problems. As the literature on modern terrorism concludes, it was the torture chambers in Egyptian prisons during the Nasser era and his policies of political exclusion of Islamists that helped incubate religious extremism, rejection of the state and its political authority, spawned Takfirist ideology and helped give rise to al Gama'a al-Islamiyah and Al Qaeda. As most analysts and observers have argued, Egypt is sliding back to a state worse than the Mubarak-era police brutality, which could radicalize those who had previously shunned violence and accepted the democratic process.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ See for example, Doug Bandow 'Egypt's El- Sisi established Tyranny Mubarak only Dreamt of' *CATO Institute*, September 1, 2014; Patrick Kinsley 'Worse than the dictators' *The Guardian*, December 24, 2014; Sarah Lynch 'Egypt faces a new, harsher kind of repression' *USA Today*, November 23, 2014.

The 2011 uprisings inaugurated an era of mass politicization and have arguably ushered in a new paradigm characterized by the empowerment of individuals, a technologically savvy generation, a politically awakened population and a highly ambitious and globally connected youth. Using the tools of intimidation, repression, propaganda and harkening back at the narrative of fear mongering characteristic of the Mubarak era may provide short-term fixes, but it will neither restore domestic order nor help build bridges necessary to achieve national reconciliation with opposition political forces.⁵⁵ The mismatch between a policy aimed at reestablishing stability and a strategy focused on escalating state-led political violence will likely exacerbate the current bloody confrontations between the state and its agitated youth and leave Egypt with a profound sense of uncertainty for many years to come.

7. Findings and Conclusion

By exploring the Egyptian government crisis management strategies, this chapter focused on the pre-crisis planning stage, the strategies adopted on the crisis' onset and whether or not policymakers adapted their goals and means to the unforeseeable circumstances that ensued. Mubarak's clique and the Military Council constituted two distinct policymaking units and developed different crisis plans.

Concerning the pre-crisis phase, regime officials failed to anticipate, mitigate, alter the triggering events or channel the impending popular mobilization towards less damaging outcomes. The element of surprise played a role in the initial paralysis while facing the crisis, and officials

⁵⁵ Amr Khalifa 'The Counterrevolution Will be Televised: Propaganda and Egyptian Television since the Revolution' *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 20, winter 2015.

took for granted most of the pre-crisis events. Most crucially, the regime lacked contingency plans to handle this scale of popular mobilization, the political leadership underestimated intelligence reports that challenged their existing beliefs and government officials were unable or unwilling to confront the president with bad news. Mubarak's government neither formed a crisis group nor formulated a clear strategy to deal with the uprising. The president wanted to stay in power and held firmly to that goal as well as to his flawed assessment of the crisis, using the same means without reassessing nor adjusting his strategy to new developments on the ground and despite the fact that, as events developed, his objective of remaining in office seemed increasingly remote. This particular case corroborates the research hypothesis.

The military council's strategy during the 18-day uprising focused on containing the protests without the use of force and on the return to normalcy. The SCAF maintained its strategy objectives all along but modified its tactics in the wake of unanticipated events. The means to achieve their goals covered a wide range of options from attempting to save Mubarak when conditions seemed favorable at the crisis outset, to easing him out of power in order to prevent the escalation of the uprising into an all sweeping revolution. Since the SCAF had contemplated a comparable scenario (popular rejection of Gamal's presidency) and had determined its response to such eventuality, its crisis management strategy was much clearer, adaptive and coherent than that of the President's inner circle.

The SCAF had set the protection of its prerogatives and vast economic interests and the restoration of stability as its core objectives during the post-Mubarak period. However, throughout the transitional years, it gave priority to the former objective rather than the latter, or in spite of it. First, it monopolized the political transition process, failed to affect necessary reforms and inadvertently, or by lacking foresight, it provoked the Brotherhood to enter the presidential race.

Second, during Morsi's presidency, and after having preserved its special privileges in the Islamist-drafted constitution, the Council sided with the counter-revolution and overthrew the elected president, derailed the democratic transition and contributed to further violence and instability. Third, in the quest for stability, rather than recommencing the democratic process and allowing the political factions to channel their political contention institutionally, the SCAF took control of the state and reinstated a more repressive authoritarianism than that of Mubarak, ignoring sixty years of teachable history, expanding the cycle of political violence and plunging the country into further turmoil.⁵⁶ The military's main obsession to maintain its special status and privileges has seemingly clouded its judgment to the core national interest and need to restore stability and order.

Crises tend to bring to light latent problems, organizational pathologies, issues of accountability, blind spots, faulty heuristics and flawed assumptions. States as well as organizations should analyze and critically reflect on the lessons learned and integrate them into their crisis management strategies, to improve their respective organizational capabilities and implement long-awaited reforms. Police brutality was a primary catalyst to the January 25th uprising. Since then, successive governments have failed to reform the security sector, and have rather coopted it against their political rivals. Worse, it seems that the lesson learned from the January 25th revolution was to use not *less*, but rather *more* brutal and swift repression in the face of popular mobilization. Security sector reform is unlikely to occur anytime soon as Egypt continues to descend into chaos.

In addition, if the security rank and file has learned anything over the past four years, it is that their immunity from the law remained intact throughout the period, despite the changes in

⁵⁶ See for example: 'Egyptian army struggles to address terrorism in Sinai' *AL Monitor*, February 11, 2015

presidents, governments and constitutions. Sayigh argues that the “security sector acts as if it has not only shaken off the sense of defeat and humiliation inflicted on it since the 2011 uprising, but has indeed emerged from the transition as a winner and now seeks revenge.”⁵⁷ The fact-finding national commission, established by the military council few weeks after Mubarak’s ouster, issued fourteen recommendations to avert another crisis of popular revolts, none of which were realized by the government. Among these recommendations were the expansion of civil liberties, independence of the judiciary, and the implementation of security sector reforms. But undoubtedly, governments rarely tolerate iconoclasm in policymaking, especially an authoritarian regime embroiled in internal conflicts.

Most regrettably, a narrative gaining traction in the Egyptian media discourse depicts the January 25th revolution as a plot to ravage Egypt, seeing events as “an aberration seized upon by the Muslim Brotherhood and foreign-backed agents and provocateurs...who were all the while orchestrating the fall of the nation”.⁵⁸ This media discourse can only foster an environment in which officials are discouraged from adequately assessing and understanding the root causes of the crisis and of modifying their policies and operating procedures, which is at the core of effective crisis management. In addition, the current intolerance to dissent demonstrates that the sycophantic culture is still at work, sustaining the mirror state whereby leaders see only what they want to see and hear only what they want to hear. This culture inhibited Mubarak from detecting the early warning signs of the crisis, from acting on intelligence reports and from responding effectively to the popular revolt.

⁵⁷ Yezid Sayigh ‘Reconstructing the Police State’ *Carnegie Center*, August 22, 2013.

⁵⁸ Abdalla F. Hassan ‘How Egypt’s January 25 Revolutionaries Became Enemies of the State’ *VICE*, February 10, 2014.

Finally, Egypt has undergone four tumultuous years of turmoil that have reached full circle: a popular uprising, the overthrow of an entrenched dictator, highly competitive parliamentary and presidential elections, a military coup and the restoration of an authoritarian regime. The acquittal of Mubarak et al and the return of NDP former officials to political life is often argued as a testament of a triumphant counter-revolution led by the ‘deep state’ and “as if the revolution never happened from the start”.⁵⁹ Like Egypt, but with much less drama and violence, Tunis has also witnessed the return of veterans of its old regime to power, though through elections. These cases corroborate the research’s main argument that moderately authoritarian regimes concede on the onset of popular uprising, which in turn enables them to regroup and ascend to power through either elections or military coups.

⁵⁹ David K. Kirkpatrick ‘Tycoon and Mubarak Ally Seeks Return to Parliament’ *The New York Times*, February 8, 2015.

The 2011 Syrian Uprising

When the Arab revolts began on December 2010, few believed that they would reach Syria. The Syrian regime had a notorious record of violent repression. Its security services had long subdued society through extensive surveillance, tight restrictions of civil liberties and a pervasive climate of fear. In less than a year after the uprising in March 2011, the regime's brutal crackdown turned a peaceful uprising into a full-blown civil war whose scale of destruction and resulting humanitarian crisis are often described as "the worst since WWII."¹ At the time of this writing (August 2015), more than half the Syrian population has either perished or been displaced, the economy contracted by more than half of its real terms and large swaths of the country have come under the authority of terrorist groups including ISIS and al-Nusra Front who have developed their own administrative structures.²

The regime defied predictions of an imminent collapse. Instead, it has demonstrated considerable cohesion and resiliency despite heavy losses, high casualties and significant erosion of state authority and legitimacy. Bashar embarked on a very risky strategy of zero sum civil conflict. He committed his government to a strategy of defeating the opposition militarily, even at the expense of shattering the Syrian state, tearing the social fabric asunder and devastating the local economy. His regime encountered numerous instances of serious battlefield setbacks that often stirred speculations of an impending regime breakdown and endgame. On July 26, 2015, Bashar acknowledged on a televised speech that the Syrian military faced "manpower shortage" and "fatigue" to the extent that it had to cede some areas to insurgents. In addition, he restated his

¹ See for example 'Syria...the Worst Humanitarian Crisis Since WW2' *New Europe*, April 2, 2015

² David Butter 'Syria's Economy: Picking up the Pieces' *Chatham House*, June 2015, p. 2-4

uncompromising policy position arguing that “the talk of political solution to the Syrian crisis is hollow and meaningless” but admitted, ironically, that many Syrians could not watch his address due to the lack of electricity in a country ravaged by four years of civil war.³

Bashar’s strategy jeopardizes the national survival of the state and the political survival of his own regime and it constitutes a policy paradox that raises the following questions: why did the regime prioritize repression over political settlement when both the relatively mild repression in Egypt and the extreme repression and civil war in Libya failed to save their leaders? Syria is increasingly turning into an ungovernable wasteland as the civil war grinds on and wreaks havoc on the country’s infrastructure and civilian population. What motivated Bashar’s apparent policy of ‘destroying a country in order to save it’? Did the decision unit shift during the crisis and to what extent did it influence the outcomes? How did the gradual buildup of international pressure affect the regime’s crisis policy choices? What was the government’s crisis strategy? Did they adapt their means and goals to changing circumstances? The following chapters aim to answer these questions.

This case study follows the same outline of the previous one in which each chapter addresses one research question and examines its corresponding hypothesis. The first chapter investigates the relationship between the Syrian regime’s level of authoritarianism and the political costs of state repression, with particular focus on the last decade of Bashar’s tenure in power *prior* to the uprising (2000-2010). By measuring the level of the regime’s authoritarianism and the corresponding political costs of state repression *before* the uprising, the author seeks to explain how such authoritarianism influenced policy crisis behavior in the following chapters. The second

³ ‘Assad Admits Shortfall in Syrian Army Capacity’ *Al Arabia News*, July 26, 2015. Also, President Bashar al-Assad full speech, July 26, 2015 (Arabic): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMvYhm48nAg&app=desktop>

chapter analyzes the first three months of the uprising by dividing it into a series of crises of contentious collective actions. In this chapter, the author will probe the relationship between the government's political cost of repression and policy responses as events unfolded. The third chapter explores whether or not the decision-making unit changed throughout the crisis and the implications on the outcomes. The fourth chapter studies the extent to which international costs or pressure influenced government policy response. Finally, exploring the state's crisis management strategy is the focus of the fifth chapter.

Chapter 10

Authoritarian Consolidation and the Political Costs of State Repression

This chapter investigates the first hypothesis in this research, i.e.; *as regime consolidation increases, the political costs of state repression decreases*. As in the previous case study, one can measure the level of consolidation by examining both the regime's institutional and discursive powers. Graphing consolidation against the regime's violent repression scores helps identify whether correlation exists. Next, this project uses a descriptive analysis to reveal the potential pathway through which the cause brings about the outcome. This chapter ends with a summary of the findings and conclusions.

1. Institutional Power

The Polity IV index measures the institutional dominance of a given regime over the state. Under Hafiz al-Assad (1970-2000), Syria maintained an average score of -9, which then changed to a score of -7 during Bashar's last decade before the uprising (2000-2010). In various regime typologies, the political system in Syria falls within the categories or descriptions of personalist regimes,⁴ highly authoritarian,⁵ military-one party,⁶ modern military praetorianism⁷ and one-man

⁴ See for example: Ferran Brichs (ed.), *Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power* (New York: Routledge, 2012): p.186

⁵ Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999): p.22

⁶ Alex Hadenius and Jan Teorell 'Authoritarian Regimes: Stability, Change and Pathways to Democracy, 1972-2003' Working Paper # 331, *Hellen Kellogg Institute for International Studies*, November 2006, p. 29

⁷ Amos Perlmutter, *Modern Authoritarianism: A Comparative Institutional Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981): p. 42

rule.⁸ In comparison to other types of autocracies, the leader in a personalist regime has a higher concentration of authority in his hands, the political order is highly personalized to the officeholder's political needs and state institutions are weak and passive.⁹ Essentially, the regime appropriates or constitutes the state by creating or molding existing institutions in its own image and placing the leader above all constitutional and institutional constraints.¹⁰ Therefore, in comparison to Egypt (Polity score of -5), comparative politics literature describes Syria as having a higher level of authoritarianism.

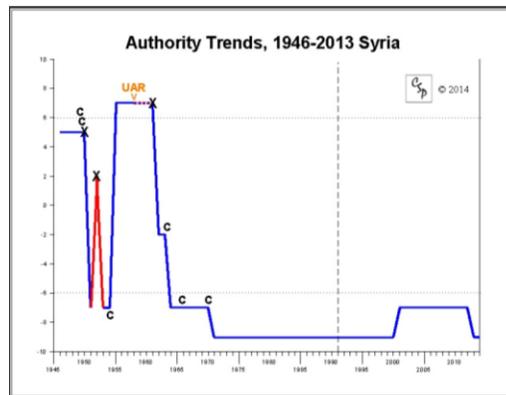


Figure-8: Syria Polity IV scores (1945 – 2013).

In the graph above, Bashar's ascension to power in 2000 registered with a decrease in the authority trends (less autocratic) following its very limited and ostensibly symbolic political openings. Below is a synopsis of how the regime consolidated its institutional power in the political, coercive, judicial and economic domains.

⁸ Volker Perthes 'The Political Economy of the Syrian Succession' *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 43, Issue 4, pp. 143-154 (August, 2001)

⁹ See for example: Joshua Stacher 'Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession' *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 2, pp. 197-212 (Spring 2011): p.199-200

¹⁰ See for example: Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder, CO: Westview Pres, 1990)

1.1 Consolidation of Political Power

After seizing power in a military coup on March 1971, Hafiz al-Assad established a one-party rule, a highly centralized political structure and a national security state that promulgated a personality cult around the president. The constitution concentrated a vast array of powers onto the head of state: he is the General Secretary of the ruling Baath Party, the head of the Progressive National Front PNF (a formal alliance that includes small and loyal political parties under the leadership of the ruling Baath party) and the supreme commander of the army and armed forces. He has the authority to appoint and dismiss anyone subordinate to his position in the government's hierarchy, such as: the vice president, members of the cabinet, senior officials, governors, editors-in-chief of state-run media and university presidents, to name a few. His powers extend to the legislative branch: he can dissolve the parliament, approve of or reject parliamentary decisions and issue decrees with the force of a law of his own.¹¹ Most importantly, there are no constitutional means to replace the president unless he himself resigns voluntarily.¹²

Hafiz crushed the Islamist-led uprising in early 1980s and survived a coup attempt at the hands of his brother Rif'at. Having defeated his domestic foes, he then consolidated his grip over the state and turned Syria into one of the most feared *mukhabarat* states in the region that enforced political conformity, popular demobilization and quietude. His absolutist rule enabled him to place his son (Bassel and then Bashar) on the line of succession and sideline the Baath party from power to the degree that the general party congress did not hold annual meetings from 1985 until he passed away on 2000.¹³ Volker Perthes, Chairman and Director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs and a renowned expert on Syria, argued that while the Baath

¹¹ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad: Modernization and the Limits of Change* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004): p. 7

¹² Ibid, p.12

¹³ Ibid, p. 25

remained as the ruling party, “it did not control the regime...it provided a mass basis and a vast patronage network.”¹⁴

In the mid-1990s, Hafiz purged the government of its top security chiefs who seemed reluctant to accept Bashar’s succession. These retirements included prominent figures and long serving commanders such as the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army Hikmat al-Shihabi (1974-1998) as well as the head of military intelligence Ali Duba (1974-2000). When Hafiz died on June 10, 2000, the parliament swiftly changed the constitution to put Bashar in power; it lowered the minimum age to stand for president from 40 to 34 and cancelled Article 88, which appoints the vice president the ruler. A hastily organized public referendum confirmed him as president with 97.3 percent result.¹⁵ Thus, Syria became the first hereditary republic in the Arab Middle East. The highly orchestrated and smooth transfer of power demonstrated “the extent of the regime’s total control.”¹⁶ This is unlike Egypt where widespread public opposition as well as uneasiness within the regime’s own political coalition developed in response to attempts to groom Gamal for the presidency.

As president, Bashar preserved the same authoritarian structure that guaranteed his dominance and absolute authority over the state and society.¹⁷ While he kept some of his father’s aides, he also continued purging potential centers of power and former regime icons, which culminated in the defection of the long serving Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam (1984-2005). Bashar placed immediate family members and trusted friends in various top security and ministerial positions. Such measures helped strengthen his hold on power as he concentrated state

¹⁴ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p.25

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 7

¹⁶ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013): p. 45

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 50

authority in a small group of loyalists.¹⁸ David Lesch, a scholar of Middle East history who had interviewed President Bashar regularly before the uprising, argued that by 2006, it was clear “that *his* people were beginning to monopolize all the important positions in the state. Any sense that Bashar’s authority might be inhibited by a remnant of the ‘old guard’ from his father’s days was gone.”¹⁹ Bashar executed this replacement of ‘guards’ without destabilizing his rule since the core of the regime comprised of Alawite-dominated security and intelligence apparatus, the well-connected business class, the co-opted religious establishment and Baath party functionaries saw stability through authoritarian continuity.²⁰

Damascus Spring

Syrians hoped that the young and western-educated president would usher in a new era of democratic opening. In his inauguration speech, Bashar pledged to liberalize politics and the economy. He ordered the closure of the notorious Mezze military prison, released hundreds of political prisoners and permitted the return of political dissidents. This encouraged a number of Syrian intellectuals to publish a memorandum that called for political reforms such as ending the emergency law, legalizing the formation of independent political parties and lifting restrictions on civil liberties. The regime initially responded with restraint by allowing activists to establish forums or ‘political salons’ and engage in public debates and mild critique of domestic issues.²¹

¹⁸ Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013): p.24

¹⁹ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, new updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 50 (emphasis in the original)

²⁰ Fredric C. Hof et al. ‘Sectarian Violence in Syria’s Civil War: Causes, Consequences and Recommendation for Mitigation’ *The Center for the Prevention of Genocide*, 2012, p.20

²¹ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p. 16

This democratic trend, also known as the ‘civil-society movement’, soon spread outside the capital and the ‘Damascus Spring’ was born.

By early 2001, instead of following through on promises of reform, authorities launched a counteroffensive to suppress the reformist movement: it arrested and sentenced activist leaders to lengthy prison terms, banned others from travel and closed down debating clubs. Bashar rejected demands for political change and chose to prioritize limited economic openings over democratic reforms.²² Like other dictators in the region, he employed the orientalist narrative claiming that his people were not ready for democracy yet and that radical Islamists would ascend to power should political opening occur.²³ The regime also cited US threats of regime change in the post 9/11 security environment (and later, the 2003 occupation of Iraq and the Hariri assassination in 2005) as justifications to freeze reforms and disallow all forms of dissent. Throughout the 2001-2006 period, Bashar accused reformists of aiding the enemy by putting pressure on the Syrian government. He also called upon all Syrians to join forces with the state in fighting what he described as ‘conspiracies against Syria’.²⁴ This dealt a serious blow to hopes for systemic and gradual regime-led political change, putting an abrupt end to the Damascus Spring.²⁵

As for political participation, the ruling Baath party, along with its subordinate affiliates in the NPF, remained the only legal party. By law, two-third of the seats in the parliament go to the NPF, leaving a third for “independent candidates [who] have very limited chance of success if they are not in full agreement with the regime.”²⁶ Despite maintaining a parliamentary majority, the

²² Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances* (Seattle, Cune Press, 2012): p.46

²³ See for example: Azmi Bishara, *Syria: a Path to Freedom from Suffering: An Attempt in Contemporary History* (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), Arabic: p. 35

²⁴ Ibid, p.47

²⁵ The late Fouad Ajami, who was a senior fellow at the Hoover institution and an expert on Middle East politics, commented: “There was nothing incendiary in the Damascus Declaration [for reforms]. Its language and demands were mild, but in the context of the tyranny and the monopoly on power...it was a bold challenge to that ossified state”. Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford, Hoover Institution press, 2012): p. 66

²⁶ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, p. 56

regime confined the legislative assembly's role to approving laws put forward by the government. The legislative assembly had neither power to scrutinize the executive nor to affirm or withdraw confidence from the cabinet.²⁷ Given the parliament's little powers, political apathy and election boycotts, parliamentary elections often witness low voter turnouts that in one instance, it did not exceed 10 percent according to unofficial figures.²⁸

Unlike in Egypt, Syrian liberal and secular opposition forces inside the country were weak, resource-poor, penetrated by the *mukhabarat*, lacking grassroots support, and largely remained loyal to the regime.²⁹ Many opposition leaders stayed in exile while the rank and file suffered under constant government surveillance and intimidation. In addition, the regime combined its strategy of repression with co-optation: membership in the Muslim Brotherhood remained punishable by death while individuals associated with the regime were given their priority of jobs in the public sector.³⁰ Most importantly, Bashar used his popular foreign policy (opposition to Israel and US occupation of Iraq) to generate nationalist legitimacy and cast his regime as the bulwark against foreign interference. This helped him deflect domestic pressures for reforms, ostracize democratic activists and present his regime as the best alternative to rule over a fragmented opposition and a divided society exposed to external threats and internal instability.³¹

Unlike Egypt, Syria's civil society is highly curtailed.³² When Bashar took power in 2000, there were an estimated 750 registered civil society organizations.³³ By 2010, the number increased

²⁷ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, p. 56

²⁸ *ibid*, p. 172, note 72

²⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch 'Syria: from "authoritarian upgrading" to revolution' *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1, pp. 93-113 (2012): p. 103

³⁰ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 90

³¹ *Ibid*, p.106

³² Egypt had an estimated 21,500 registered civil society organizations in 2007.

Mahi Khalaf 'Civil Society in Egypt: A Literature Review' Paper presented at *The Regional Conference on Research on Civil Society Organizations: Status and Prospects*, Jordan, 26-28 January 2010, p.3

³³ Muhammed Jamal Barout, *Syria in the Last Decade: the Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Beirut, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012): p.151

only by 605 organizations.³⁴ Legal restrictions, pervasive censorship, penetration by intelligence services and an active emergency law that suspended the right of assembly have all hollowed civil society institutions.³⁵ While labor unions and syndicates existed, the government confined their primary role to that of defending the regime's policies, cooperating with security, preventing strikes and maintaining control over the organization.³⁶ As a Syrian member of parliament once confided,

What the regime says is 180 degrees from the truth: they make a worker's union against the workers, a women's union against women, a Parliament against democracy....No one believes the things they say, and everyone knows that no one believes them.³⁷

Furthermore, Syrian authorities banned both pro-democracy groups and Syrian human rights organizations.³⁸ However, rather than completely crush these civil activities, the regime has embraced a strategy of adaptation by allowing individuals close to the ruling family or loyalists among intellectuals and urbane elites to sponsor semi-official NGOs.³⁹ These NGOs are apolitical, enjoy protected status, focus on providing services to the citizens and serve to bolster the image of the regime domestically and internationally.⁴⁰ Examples of these NGOs include Shabab (Youth), Fund for Integrated Rural Development of Syria (FIRDOS) and Modernizing and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development (MAWRED), which are all sponsored by Syria's First Lady, Asma al-Assad.⁴¹ Based on the Freedom House index scores (using a scale 1 to 7, 1=free

³⁴ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, p. 32

³⁵ 'A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar's al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power' *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, p. 5-10

³⁶ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, p. 32

³⁷ Quoted in, Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999): p. 3

³⁸ 'A Wasted Decade' *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, p. 8

³⁹ Steven Heydemann 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World' *Saban Center Analysis Paper*, Number 13, 2007, *Brookings Institute*, 2007, pp. 8-9

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

and 7=not free) the graph below shows how Syria fared worse than Egypt in terms of political rights and civil liberties in the last two decades.

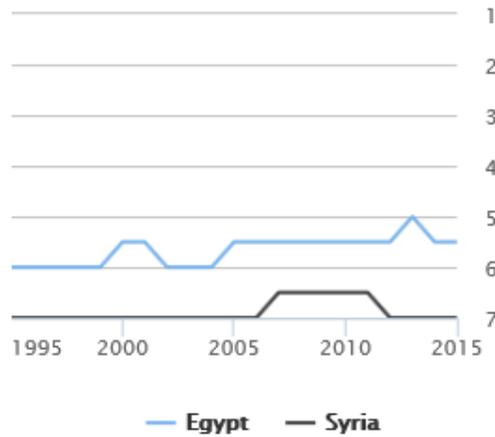


Figure-9: Freedom House Scores, Egypt vs. Syria 1995-2015

Foreign Policy Disasters: Shaking the Assad's Throne

By early 2004, Bashar was firmly in control of power in Syria. Increasingly confident in his domestic base, he embarked on a series of foreign policy adventures. On September 2004, Bashar pressured the Lebanese Parliament for an unconstitutional extension of office for President Emile Lahoud. This was an unpopular move and, as a result, Syria lost allies and both the United States and France sponsored UN Security Council resolution 1559 that demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the disarmament of all militias.⁴² In addition, Syria suffered increased international pressure and diplomatic isolation when a UN investigation implicated Syrian officials in the Hariri assassination.⁴³ Ultimately, Assad withdrew Syrian forces from Lebanon, thereby losing significant influence over what the regime had long regarded as a Syrian

⁴² Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004), available from: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2004/sc8181.doc.htm>

⁴³ See for example 'New evidence points to Syrian involvement in Hariri murder- UN report' *UN News Center*, December 13, 2005.

province. This political debacle challenged Bashar's authority and generated rumors of a palace coup while "[r]egime loyalists debated whether Assad was capable at all of defending Syria's national interests."⁴⁴

Assad Vindicated, Syria Rehabilitated

Several events helped Assad overcome the Lebanon ordeal, reinforce his power domestically and ultimately emerge triumphant by 2009. First, while the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war damaged the Lebanese civil infrastructure and inflicted high civilian casualties, its strategic outcome was disastrous to Israel since it demonstrated the limits of using military force against an ideological, highly organized and well-funded armed militia that operates within the civilian population.⁴⁵ By declaring a strategic victory over Israel, Hezbollah and President Assad became the heroes of the Arab Middle East.⁴⁶ Assad then turned his domestic and regional popularity into a mandate to further tighten the noose on dissent, silence critics and win another presidential term in a nationwide referendum in 2007.

Second, the Bush Administration placed Syria in the extended "axis of evil" list, passed into law the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act and advocated for regime change in Damascus. In response to these threats, the Syrian regime supported the insurgency in Iraq and ultimately achieved its intended objectives: by 2006, Iraq descended into a violent sectarian civil conflict and the US public support for the war continued to decline as

⁴⁴ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 53

⁴⁵ See for example, Scott Wilson 'Official Panel Accuses Israeli Leaders of Multiple Failures in Lebanon War' *Washington Post*, May 1, 2007.

⁴⁶ See for example, Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 54

casualties rose among American soldiers.⁴⁷ The Bush Administration was struggling in two major wars and seemed unwilling or unable to start a third major military action in the Middle East. Having confronted a “belligerent” superpower and repelled its threat against Syria, Assad emerged triumphant, enjoyed substantial domestic support and with this, bolstered the regime’s anti-imperialism narrative.⁴⁸

Third, when Obama came to office, his administration decided to explore a new path in US-Syria relations. Mutual mistrust ran deep and Bush-era economic sanctions remained in place; however, the flurry of visits by US officials to Damascus culminated in appointing Robert Ford Ambassador to Syria in 2010 and initiating the Syrian-Israeli peace talks. Europe also began to open up to Syria when Sarkozy invited Bashar to the Élysée in 2008. In addition, Syrian trade and diplomatic relations with Turkey and the Arab states improved significantly. In short, Syria came out of its isolation and restored its relations with other nations without having to change or renounce its foreign policies. This was due in large part to the international community’s recognition of Syria’s important role in regional politics and conflict resolution, specifically in Lebanon and Iraq.⁴⁹

Furthermore, people around the world saw the election of president Obama as an American repudiation of Bush’s unpopular foreign policies.⁵⁰ As Wiam Wahab, a Lebanese journalist and former political advisor commented at the time that the dominant perception in Syria and the region

⁴⁷ For example, in Pew national survey, 67% of Americans said the war was not going well (February 2007) and 56% favored troop pullout (June 2007). ‘Public Attitude Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008’ *Pew Research Center*, March 19, 2008.

⁴⁸ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p.50

⁴⁹ See for example: Erich Follath ‘Wooing the Pariah: How Syria’s Assad Is Steering His Country out of Isolation’ *Spiegel*, September 23, 2008

⁵⁰ See for example: Adam Nagourney ‘Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls’ *The New York Times*, November 4, 2008

was that “George Bush’s plans failed, Syria won and Syrians now feel that their policies were correct all along.”⁵¹ Feeling vindicated by the Western and Arab rapprochement and recognizing its centrality to key regional issues, Bashar continued to delay democratic reforms and suppress opposition activists.⁵² Carsten Wieland, a leading analyst and author on Middle Eastern affairs, recalls

Syrians were proud of their president for resisting international sanctions, the US intervention in Iraq, and international pressure connected with the Hariri Tribunal. And in their view, Asad was the only Arab leader left who dared to speak out against Israel.⁵³

In short, Bashar’s regime monopolized significant political power over state institutions and civil society in a manner commensurate with a highly authoritarian structure.

1.2 Consolidation of Coercive Power

The military, the security apparatus and intelligence services constitute the formal coercive institutions of the Syrian state. By creating multiple security organs and parallel military forces and relying on a specific group for loyalty, Hafiz had built a coup-proof regime.⁵⁴ All heads of the military units and security agencies reported directly to the president and both sectarian identity and loyalty were the most important consideration in recruitments, appointments and promotions.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Natalie Antelava ‘US-Syria relations still mired in mistrust’ *BBC News*, Beirut, 18 March 2009.

⁵² Azmi Bishara, *Syria: a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 62

⁵³ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 54

⁵⁴ James T. Quinlivan ‘Coup-proofing: Its practice and consequences in the Middle East’ *International Security*, Vol. 24, No.2, 131-165 (Fall 1999)

⁵⁵ See for example: Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game: Foreign Policy under the Assads* (London: Hurts, 2013): p. 15

As the case in most authoritarian regimes, those officials who demonstrate unwavering loyalty and obedience to the president serve long tenures in their positions.⁵⁶

Syria experts often speak of three distinct circles to indicate how Hafez al-Assad staffed the coercive institutions since state formation. First, Assad placed relatives and fellow Alawites in the circle closest to the regime leadership. These include the key guards, intelligence and security units charged with defending the regime. In the second circle, he placed senior Baathist allies, clients and loyalists who included non-Alawites; however, these primarily served as functionaries. The outer circle consisted of the officer corps and the wider professional cadre.⁵⁷ Numerous analysts, country experts and regime insiders have echoed similar arguments about the sectarian makeup of the Syrian security institutions and the implications for consolidating presidential power. For example, Nawaf Fares, former Syrian ambassador to Iraq who also served as a senior intelligence officer (defected on July 2012), argued:

After crushing the Hama massacre in the 1980s...Hafiz exploited his victory to wipe out all semblance of opposition against his regime. He restructured state institutions beginning with the military and security services by retiring professional officers and replaced them with absolute loyalists, but particularly with fellow Alawites...there hasn't been a true national military ever since as Hafiz transformed it into a sectarian entity...As such, Hafiz tied the Alawite community to that of the regime.⁵⁸

Following the failed military coup by Rif'at al-Assad in 1984, Hafez disbanded military forces loyal to the former, purged their officers from service and developed and well equipped the republican guards.⁵⁹ The Guards is an elite force headed by Maher al-Assad (Bashar's brother) and

⁵⁶ Rosa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): p.42

⁵⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder, CO: Westview press, 1990): p. 160-162

⁵⁸ Interview. Nawaf Fares, *Without Borders* Program, Al Jazeera Arabic, August 8, 2012

⁵⁹ 'Syrian Ex-general: Here is How to Overthrow Assad' *Middle East Voices*, December 6, 2011

tasked to protect the capital and serve as a counterweight to other military forces. Despite only constituting about 10 percent of the population, Alawites comprise up to 80 percent of the guards,⁶⁰ and to maintain their loyalty, they receive significant patronage compared to their counterparts in other units.⁶¹

The regime also restructured other coercive institutions to the extent that while Sunnis make up the bulk of the military's foot soldiers, "over 90% of the key commands in the armed forces and security apparatus are held by Alawis."⁶² Although the Syrian military's share of the local economy remained small compared to that of its Egyptian counterpart, the Syrian officer corps derived significant benefits through kickbacks, smuggling activities and drug trafficking, and has therefore had substantial economic incentives to support Assad's regime.⁶³ Therefore, the strategy of employing sectarian "preferences" combined with "individual incentives" sought to commit forces to the Assad regime.⁶⁴ Indeed, it is no wonder why defections and desertions during the uprising have mostly occurred within the Syrian ordinary army units, prompting Syrian authorities to rely increasingly on its Alawite-dominated elite forces as well as on Iran-funded Shiite mercenaries to crackdown on protesters.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ See for example, Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999): p.237

⁶² Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): p. 32

⁶³ Robert Springborg 'Economic Involvements of Militaries' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 397-399 (2011): p. 397

⁶⁴ Theodore McLaughlin 'Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion' *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 333-350 (April 2013): p. 337-339

⁶⁵ 'Syrian Ex-general: Here is how to overthrow Assad' *Middle East Voices*, December 6, 2011; Farnaz Fassihi 'Iran Pays for Afghans to Fight got Assad: Offers them \$500 stipends, residency benefits' *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2014

The intelligence and security services are the most powerful state institutions and constitute the main instruments of control over society.⁶⁶ Assad maintained his indisputable authority over both services by encouraging inter-agency rivalry as a means to monitor each other's activities, by appointing officials based on personal loyalty to the president, by preventing the emergence of strongmen or independent power centers and by demonstrating his capability to fire or neutralize senior security commanders on several occasions.⁶⁷

Equally important, Assad disproportionately packed the higher echelons of the security and *mukhabarat* with Alawites and empowered them to spy on the people, the military and one another. For example, the regime embedded junior Alawite officers in pivotal units with non-Alawite commanders in order to monitor their loyalty.⁶⁸ In fact, under Bashar, the security apparatus dominated both the Baath Party and the Military.⁶⁹ In short, the Syrian presidency exercised significant control over the coercive institutions and successfully linked their institutional survival to that of the regime.

1.3 Consolidation of Judicial Power

By the constitution, the Syrian president enjoys unrivaled power within the judiciary: he chairs the highest judiciary body in the state (the High Judicial Council) and has the power to select, promote and dismiss judges.⁷⁰ As in all authoritarian regimes, the judiciary plays an important role in empowering the state to repress opposition activities. By criminalizing a range of practices of oppositional politics, courts provide legal cover for a host of state-led political

⁶⁶ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p. 12

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.153

⁶⁸ Zenobia 'Syria: a superior officer speaks' *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 7, 2011.

⁶⁹ ibid

⁷⁰ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p. 7

repression. The Syrian regime governed under emergency law from 1963 until Assad nominally abolished it on April 21, 2011, in the midst of the uprising. Emergency law grants the security services sweeping powers to detain individuals without trial for a range of vaguely worded crimes such as undertaking acts that “endanger public safety”, “weaken national sentiments” and “incite sectarian, racial, or religious strife.”⁷¹ The same law also allowed the creation of Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), which prosecutes political dissent. Legislative Decree 47 (1968) exempted the SSSC from following the formal judicial procedures adopted in civilian courts (such as due process), empowered only the president to nullify its verdicts and placed the court beyond judicial review by any other judicial institution.⁷² In addition, Emergency Law had extended the jurisdiction of military tribunals over civilians for a variety of loosely defined offenses. Observers have described that these military courts engaged in even far more extrajudicial practices than the SSSC.⁷³

Unlike the Egyptian judiciary, which maintained a minimal level of independence, retained its corporate identity and challenged Mubarak’s regime on several occasions, the Syrian judiciary was subdued to the executive by the regime, and as such, it was deprived of its institutional autonomy.⁷⁴ In fact, the Syrian authorities reverted on numerous instances to extrajudicial violence “where even the semblance of functioning courts [had] been abandoned.”⁷⁵ Human Rights organizations constantly denounced Syria’s lack of adherence to basic judiciary procedures particularly when prosecuting political dissidents such as depriving defendants of the “right to

⁷¹ See for example ‘A Wasted Decade’ *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, p. 6

⁷² *Ibid*, 172-173

⁷³ *Ibid*, 173-174

⁷⁴ See for example: Reinoud Leenders ‘Authoritarianism and the Judiciary in Syria: Regime Resilience and Implications for Judicial Reform Assistance’ Working Paper 17, *Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research*, 2010

⁷⁵ Reinoud Leenders ‘Prosecuting Political Dissent’ in *Middle East Authoritarianism: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, eds., pp. 169-199 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013): p. 171

defense”, the “right to be informed promptly of the charges”, the “right to speak” and the “right to appeal their verdicts.”⁷⁶ In short, Bashar’s regime had substantial control over the judiciary system.

1.4 Consolidation of Economic Power

Hafiz al-Assad established a state-controlled economy and followed an import-substitution model. His regime introduced limited liberalization measures and sought to invigorate the private sector following the economic recession and fiscal crises in the 1980s, while the state remained as the largest investor and entrepreneur.⁷⁷ Much of the public sector, which controls most of the industry, remained overstaffed, overcentralized, inefficient and unprofitable. In addition, large-scale corruption, economic sanctions and weak rule of law repelled foreign investments.⁷⁸ Volker explains that “[d]espite being loss-making, the public sector remained an important instrument for patronage, political mobilization and control; it also offered ample opportunities for illegal enrichment.”⁷⁹

When Bashar became president, he embarked on selective liberalization of the economy particularly in the banking sector and external trade.⁸⁰ By privatizing state monopolies and sharing the dividends of the market expansion, the regime sought to maintain the support of urban elites

⁷⁶ See for example: ‘Far from Justice: Syria’s Supreme State Security Courts’ *Human Rights Watch*, 2009; Reinoud Leenders, *Prosecuting Political Dissent*, p. 173

⁷⁷ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p.28

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.30, 37

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.36

⁸⁰ Caroline Donati ‘The Economics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria: Liberalization and the Reconfiguration of Economic Networks’ in *Middle East Authoritarianism: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, eds., pp. 35-60 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013): p. 39

in return for their political support.⁸¹ In addition, selected reforms, which included lifting the ban on imports, establishing a stock exchange, relaxing real estate laws and restructuring the tax codes have attracted foreign investments, especially from the Arab Gulf, and improved the Syrian's overall economic performance. As a result, the Syrian economy achieved a yearly average economic growth of 4.3 percent (2000-2010) and increased the average per capita income from \$3,480 in 2003 to \$5,120 in 2010.⁸² However, when Bashar asserted his political power and purged the regime's former icons and 'old guard' by mid-2000s, he narrowed the regime's elite support base and concentrated wealth in even fewer hands. Raymond Hinnebusch, a prominent Syrian expert and international relations scholar at University of St. Andrews, argues:

In uprooting these barons, Asad reduced obstacles to his reforms but also weakened powerful interests with clientelist networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. At the same time, he became more dependent on the Asad–Makhlouf family clan, with a resulting overconcentration of patronage, opportunities and corruption in its hands at the expense of other regime clients; the narrowing of loyalties from party to family core is a dangerous move for authoritarian regimes.⁸³

Market-oriented reforms primarily benefited Assad's wider family and the politically connected through obtaining exclusive lucrative deals and acquiring monopolies, hence economic growth failed to trickle down to ordinary people.⁸⁴ Bashar did not invest in developing a competitive manufacturing and industrial base by taking advantage of Syria's low production costs and proximity to the EU. Instead, his regime concentrated investments in real estate and tourism that directly funneled profits into the hands of the predatory oligarchy.⁸⁵ The emergence of

⁸¹ Caroline Donati, *The Economics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria*, p. 41

⁸² *The World Bank*, Country Data

⁸³ Raymond Hinnebusch 'Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution' *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, Issue 1, pp. 95-113 (January, 2012): p.99

⁸⁴ Volker, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p.37

⁸⁵ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p.119

business tycoons such as Rami Makhlouf, Bashar's cousin, who monopolized much of the Syrian markets in media, real estate, mobile communication, energy, private schools and tourism have demonstrated a "pervasive culture of corruption and privileged access to wealth."⁸⁶ In fact, associating with Makhlouf became a necessity for entrepreneurs in order to obtain state contracts, import permits and expand their businesses.⁸⁷

Worse still, and along the lines of economic liberalization measures, the state cut local subsidies to reduce its expenditure and allowed the imports of cheap Chinese goods, which flooded the market and wiped out many small businesses. Both measures raised the prices of goods and services, decreased employment opportunities, exacerbated the hardships of the poor, shrank the middle class and further widened the gap between rich and poor.⁸⁸ Furthermore, droughts, US economic sanctions, rapid population growth, inflation, the influx of Iraqi refugees to Syria and loss of cheap Iraqi oil after the US invasion were other major factors that helped aggravate social inequalities.⁸⁹

The level of corruption under Bashar exceeded that under his father, and pervaded all areas of public life.⁹⁰ David Lesch says "palms have to be greased for just about everything – from fixing a plumbing problem to repairing a pothole in the street; from getting a license to start a business to obtaining a favorable judgment at court. And this way of life in Syria was exploited by the rich and powerful."⁹¹ In addition, Bashar's government introduced regulations that effectively

⁸⁶ David Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 64

⁸⁷ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p.25 and p.29

⁸⁸ Christopher Philips 'Syria's Torment' *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 67-82 (August 2012): p.69

⁸⁹ See for example: Nabil Marzouq 'The Lost Development in Syria' in *The Revolution's Background: Syrian Studies*, by multiple authors, pp. 35-70 (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013) Arabic.

⁹⁰ Azmi Bishara, *Syria: a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 54

⁹¹ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p.65

encouraged corruption by empowering the security services to issue special permits or exemptions to citizens (such as digging a well during drought season, selling a property near the borders...etc.) in exchange for a commission, and hence opened the door for illegal profiteering by state bureaucrats.⁹² Corruption was not a byproduct of authoritarian politics, retrograde bureaucracy and dysfunctional economy. Rather, it was deliberate state policy aimed at creating a political system of loyalty. Alan George, a prolific commentator on Syrian politics, explains:

In addition to the direct control it exerts through its near total takeover of the state apparatus and of the institutions usually belonging to the realm of civil society, the regime also uses corruption and favoritism on a grand scale as a means of control. From top to bottom, the system is riddled with informal clientelist networks. At one extreme, the President's immediate circle appropriates enormous wealth by dint of its ability to 'broker' major business deals (i.e., block them unless substantial kickbacks are paid) and oversee illicit trade and smuggling.⁹³

Economic liberalization policies that favored the rich over the poor had a negative impact on poverty rates despite the government's anti-poverty legislation and initiatives.⁹⁴ In the period 1996-2004, the rate of poverty hovered around 30 percent of the population with a concentration of 62 percent in rural areas and 38 percent spread throughout urban centers.⁹⁵ Data showed that poverty increased 3 percent between 2004 and 2007.⁹⁶ The regime used concentration of wealth in the hands of its political elites as means to bolster its political power and gain the loyalty of the multitudes that were financially dependent on the regime's vast clientelistic networks and state bureaucracy.⁹⁷ Businessmen connected with the regime began to dominate sponsorship of sports

⁹² Azmi Bishara, *Syria: a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 66

⁹³ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (New York: Zed Books, 2003): p. 13

⁹⁴ Fayeza Sara 'Poverty in Syria: Toward a Serious Policy Shift in Combating Poverty' *Strategic Research and Communication Center*, 2011, p.15

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 6-7

⁹⁶ *Ibid*

⁹⁷ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 120-121

clubs, cultural associations and NGOs as well as to win seats in the parliamentary elections.⁹⁸ Ultimately, Assad's economic policies "further distorted the economy, increased corruption and exacerbated inequalities... [And] weakened the state to the benefit of the ruling clique."⁹⁹

In conclusion, the Syrian regime exercised significant control over the political, coercive, judicial and economic domains and hence, from the institutionalist perspective, it bore the hallmark of a highly authoritarian regime.

2. Discursive Power

As discussed earlier in this research, discursive power constitutes a regime's soft power and refers to its capacity to influence public opinion to cultivate loyalty, secure popular support and legitimize its political dominance. There is a large body of literature in political philosophy that describes the role of ideology as an instrument of social control, particularly in managing state-society relations.¹⁰⁰ A regime that embraces an official ideology and dominates the national discourse is more capable of rationalizing its actions and constructing consent around the concept of common goals, and a sense of collective purpose and opposition to common threats. As in the Egyptian case study, one can assess the extent of a regime's discursive power by looking at three factors. First, whether or not a regime adopts an official ideology. Next, the degrees of restrictions on independent media and the public's access to alternative sources of information, which is best

⁹⁸ Samir Sa'eefan 'Policies of Income Distribution and their Role in the Social Explosion in Syria' in *The Revolution's Background: Syrian Studies*, by multiple authors, pp. 95-146 (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013) Arabic, p. 110

⁹⁹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p.28-29

¹⁰⁰ See for example: Joseph S. Roucek 'Ideology as a means of Social Control' *American journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 3, pp. 35-45 (1944); Clive Emisley et al, eds., *Social Control in Europe 1800-2000* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004)

reflected by the state's press freedom score. Finally, the extent to which the regime delivers on its promises and legitimizes its narrative. Simply put, a regime that cannot provide what it promises suffers credibility problems and this erodes its capacity to secure the consent of the ruled.

2.1 State Ideology

Three Syrian revolutionary-minded intellectuals *Michel Aflaq*, *Salah al-Edin al-Bitar* and *Zaki al-Arsuzi* co-founded the Baath party in 1947. Baathism, or renaissance in Arabic, is a political ideology that combined the struggle for independence from colonialism with Pan-Arab nationalism; i.e., the ambition to unify all Arab states under a single entity. Being an artificial state of colonial construct, Syria lacked both a history of statehood and a distinct sense of national identity. Since most Syrians shared a common language, history and culture, adopting Arab nationalist ideology seemed the most appropriate option to de-emphasize social cleavages and unite its heterogeneous society under one centralized government.¹⁰¹ Baathism served as a catalyst for regime cohesion, social integration and popular mobilization, particularly in the first two decades of Hafiz's regime.

Baathists emphasize Syria's Arab identity and advocate the creation of a secular modern society to overcome the country's multiple divisions, integrate its minorities socially and politically, and to provide a path for social mobility.¹⁰² After seizing power in 1963, Baathists embarked on sweeping land reforms and nationalization, and adopted a socialist system of governance by providing employment and subsidies. While the Six-Day War dealt a decisive blow to secular Arab nationalism, particularly in Egypt, it remained the dominant ideology in Syria and

¹⁰¹ See for example: Joshua Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats*, p. 48-49

¹⁰² See for example: Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 31

underpinned the legitimacy of the Assad regimes.¹⁰³ Most importantly, the state adopted Baathism as its official ideology: the Baathist tenets of anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, Secularism and Arab Socialism constituted the regime's defining domestic and foreign policy principles. Furthermore, the constitution enshrined the monopoly of the Baath party over power by designating it in Article 8 as the "leader of state and society."

In writing about the role of ideology in Syria, it is important to clarify two points. First, while the regime embraced a Pan Arab ideology, Syria was not an ideological state. All Syria scholars are quick to point out that both Assad presidents have demonstrated pragmatism and propensity for realpolitik. This is most evident in the Assad regimes' strategy vis-à-vis Israel: despite its hostile rhetoric, Syria has been both a predictable and a deterrable adversary, and has long maintained quiet borders with Israel. Volker Perthes explains:

Ba'athism and Arab nationalism have been watered down so as not to stand in the way of the pragmatic realpolitik of the regime... The regime demands that everyone pay respect to its symbols and refrain from questioning the absolute leadership of the president... the regime does not, however, prescribe what people should believe.¹⁰⁴

Second, a Syrian national identity crystalized following the development of state institutions, the centralization of the bureaucracy and the establishment of a national Army and a vast patronage system. All these strengthened the state, connected people to the central government and fostered national integration. The national integration process became "irreversible" since most Syrians by the turn of the century were born after independence where "Syria was the only

¹⁰³ See for example Eyal Zisser 'What Does the Future Hold for Syria?' *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 2006)

¹⁰⁴ Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (New York, I.B. Tauris, 1997): p.189

entity under which they had lived.”¹⁰⁵ However, Arab nationalist sentiment remained fundamental to Baathist ideology and was the core component of the regime’s national discourse. Syrians and Arabs throughout the Middle East continued to recognize Syria as ‘the fortress of opposition and confrontation’ and the ‘beating heart of Arabism.’ Therefore, Arab nationalism and Syrian national identity were not mutually exclusive. Since actual Arab unity was out of the question, Pan Arab nationalism no longer posed a threat to the nation-state identities. In fact, the Syrian regime emphasized one identity or another at different times for domestic political consumption.¹⁰⁶ Christopher Phillips, a Middle East and author of *Everyday Arab Identity*, argues that the Syrian regime has

shown no visible desire to change the discourse away from supra-national Arabism, even if national identity is given increasing prominence...Supra-national Arab identity seems to have been produced for so long that it is now embedded as a pillar of national identity...Sustaining Arab identity benefits the regimes too much for them to actively seek to ‘de-Arabize’ the discourse.¹⁰⁷

For studying regime consolidation in this research, ideology here refers to the Gramscian sense of producing dominant understandings in regulating state-society relations. Syria’s regime engaged in secular Arab nationalist identity discourse and appropriated historical and cultural symbols in order to legitimize its claims to power and justify the Baathist political dominance. For example, the regime perpetuated the narrative of restoring the Arab golden age and its achievements, and often compared Assad to the twelfth century military hero Salah al-Edin who defeated the Crusades and reclaimed Jerusalem.¹⁰⁸ Lisa Wedeen, in her prominent work on Syria

¹⁰⁵ Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996): p. 247

¹⁰⁶ Christopher Phillips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2012): p.29-30

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ See for example Eric Rouleau ‘The Syrian Enigma: What is the Baath?’ *New Left Review* 1, (1967): p. 45

under Hafiz al-Assad, described the regime's strategy of employing political discourse, state rituals, cult of personality, outlandish display of loyalty to the president, communist-style spectacles, 'images of power' and 'popular mentalities of subordination'. The Assad regime engaged in these practices not only as means to produce subtle yet effective political power designed to promote legitimacy, but also as a "disciplinary device" to reinforce compliance, obedience, public dissimulation and ideological conformity.¹⁰⁹ Wedeen argues that "Assad [was] powerful because his regime [could] compel people to say the ridiculous and to avow the absurd."¹¹⁰ Although Assad's cult functioned as a form of power, it did not rise to the 'hegemonic' level in the Gramscian sense since Syrians did not participate in the cult of their own volition; rather they acted *as if* they believed in it.¹¹¹ In a culture of everyday cynicism and political apathy, Syrians engaged in the "politics of as if" from a utilitarian standpoint: failure to participate may result in punishment and hardship while participation may help bring economic and political rewards.¹¹² While Bashar's regime engaged in fewer practices of indoctrination and personality cult around the president compared to Hafiz's regime, Wedeen argues that

[o]fficial rhetoric under Bashar al-Asad had never fully abandoned the practices reminiscent of the old regime under Hafiz al-Asad, producing guidelines for public speech and action, enforcing obedience, and inducing complicity in part by continually generating patently spurious statements.¹¹³

As such, the Syrian regime enjoyed a moderate or mid-level discursive control; it exercised a considerable ideological influence over its populace compared to its non-ideological Egyptian

¹⁰⁹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): p.1-30

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.12

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 45

¹¹² *Ibid*, p.145

¹¹³ Lisa Wedeen 'Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp. 841-873 (Summer 2013): p. 585

counterpart, but never reached the hegemonic proportions of the inter-war totalitarian dictatorships or that of present North Korea.¹¹⁴ Volker Perthes argues that

Syria never developed into a totalitarian or, as Alan George has it, an ‘Orwellian’ State. Under Hafez al-Assad, an authoritarian system and a strong security state emerged, supported by an often extreme personality cult, but this system did not try to build society according to one ideology, or enforce thought control over its subjects.¹¹⁵

2.2 Freedom of the Press

Under Hafiz al-Assad, Syria was one of the most isolated societies in the world, whereby state-owned press and broadcast media regulated and limited the flow of information within the country. Only Baath party affiliated newspapers such as *al-Baath*, *al-Thawra* (revolution) and *Tishreen* (October) circulated in Syria.¹¹⁶ In addition, the state banned satellite TV and highly restricted access to the Internet and use of mobile phones.¹¹⁷ However, by mid-1990s, globalization pressures forced the Syrian authorities to relax its media censorship as satellite dishes proliferated and some Arab newspapers and magazines became available. In spite of this more relaxed atmosphere, the regime continued to censor international papers or close down local ones if they went beyond ‘mild’ criticism of the government.¹¹⁸

In his first year in power, Bashar continued to ease his regime’s monopoly on the media and hence permitted the penetration of the Internet and Satellite TV channels. The Ministry of

¹¹⁴ North Korea is arguably the world’s most secretive, repressive and ideological state. The Kim regime exercises significant ideological domination over its society. See for example these recent works: Jae-Jung Suh (ed.) *The Origin of North Korea’s Juche: Colonialism, War and Development* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); John Sweeney, *North Korea Undercover: Inside the World’s most Secret State* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015); Blaine Harden, *The Great Leader and Fighter Pilot: The True Story of the Tyrant Who Created North Korea and the Young Lieutenant who Stole His Way to Freedom* (New York: Penguin, 2015)

¹¹⁵ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p. 11

¹¹⁶ ‘A Wasted Decade’ *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, p. 11

¹¹⁷ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 96

¹¹⁸ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, p. 20-21

Information allowed the circulation of private newspapers and the broadcast of private radio and TV stations. Among these publications was *Addomari*, a satirical newspaper published by the prominent Syrian cartoonist, Ali Farzat. The regime began to tolerate criticism of corruption and inefficient bureaucracy as long as officials remained unnamed and, most importantly, the president remained off limits. Private media institutions belonged to government loyalists and business tycoons who adopted regime-friendly editorial policies and followed the official line on political events.¹¹⁹ These include newspapers such as *al-Watan* and *Baladna*, the former owned by Rami Makhoul and the latter by Bahjat Suleiman's family, Syria's Security Chief General.¹²⁰ In other outlets, such as the Lebanese LBC channels, most board members were associated with the Syrian regime.¹²¹ Moreover, the Syrian authorities continue to ban the publication and broadcast of outlets that disseminate material deemed too critical to the government.¹²²

Concurrent with the crackdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001, the regime quickly reversed its media openness. While state monopoly over publication ended, the Syrian authorities tightened media restrictions through licensures, monopoly on the distribution of papers, censorship, blockage of websites and clamping down on bloggers.¹²³ Journalists continued to exercise self-censorship to avoid arbitrary arrest and conviction for a host of vague charges such as "insulting the authorities", "undermining the state's dignity", "weakening national sentiments" or "promoting false news that may weaken the morale of the nation."¹²⁴ Syrian authorities used national security threats emanating from the chaos in Iraq, Israel's military operations in Lebanon

¹¹⁹ Carmen Becker 'Strategies of Power Consolidation in Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Modernizing Control Over Resources' *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 13/14, No. 2/1, pp. 65-91 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006): p.79

¹²⁰ 'A Wasted Decade' *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, p. 12

¹²¹ Marwan M. Kraidy 'Arab Satellite Television Between Regionalization and Globalization' *Global Media Journal*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (Fall 2002): p.8

¹²² 'Dangerous Assignments: 10 Most Censored Countries' *Committee to Protect Journalists*, May 2, 2006. Available from: <https://cpj.org/reports/2006/05/10-most-censored-countries.php>

¹²³ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 96-97

¹²⁴ See for example: 'A Wasted Decade' *Human Rights Watch*, 2010

and Gaza, US threats of regime change and mounting international pressure throughout the 2000s to justify its repressive behavior and suppress press freedoms. By 2005, Syrian authorities closed down many outlets including *Addomari* for what they deemed as going too far on criticism.¹²⁵

Because of his support of the Arab resistance (Hamas and Hezbollah), Bashar al-Assad remained one of the most popular leaders in the region and, compared to Egypt, the Syrian regime was the subject of far less criticism by the Arab media, especially by Al Jazeera, the most popular TV channel in the Arab World.¹²⁶ Therefore, unlike in Egypt, Syria's political opposition succeeded neither in challenging the state's hegemonic narrative (as the bastion of Arab resistance) nor in gaining grassroots support among the populace, building civil organizations or in freely articulating their ideas.¹²⁷

Under Bashar, the patriotic discourse engendered an oppressive media climate and, as Carsten describes it succinctly, "after an initial phase where new media outlets were created, there followed a period of closures, restrictions and contradictions."¹²⁸ Figure-10 below shows Syria's press freedom score, which ranked 126th in 2002 but then oscillated within the 150-178 range; i.e., commensurate with a highly restrictive media environment. In fact, by 2010, Syria ranked 173th out of 178; i.e., press freedom became far worse off than when Bashar took power in 2000. Figure-11 compares Egypt-Syria rankings. In short, the Syrian regime acquired a significant monopoly over its media outlets thus maintaining its official narrative largely unchallenged.

¹²⁵ See for example: 'Hoping for Media Freedom in Syria' *BBC News Online*, March 25, 2005

¹²⁶ See for example: Shibley Telhami, *2008 Arab Public Opinion Poll*, Washington DC, University of Maryland with Zogbi International; *2009 Arab Public Opinion Poll*; *2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll*

¹²⁷ See for example: *International Crisis Group 'Anything but Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition'* Middle East Report No. 146, October 2013, p. 7

¹²⁸ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 96

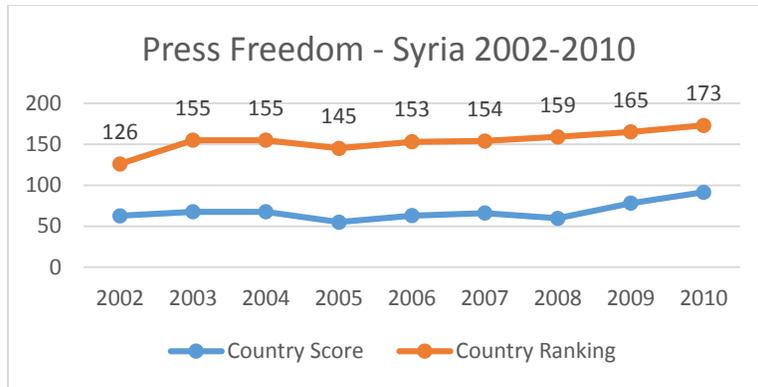


Figure-10: Syria 2002-2014 Press Freedom Scores & Country Ranking,
Source: Reporters without Borders

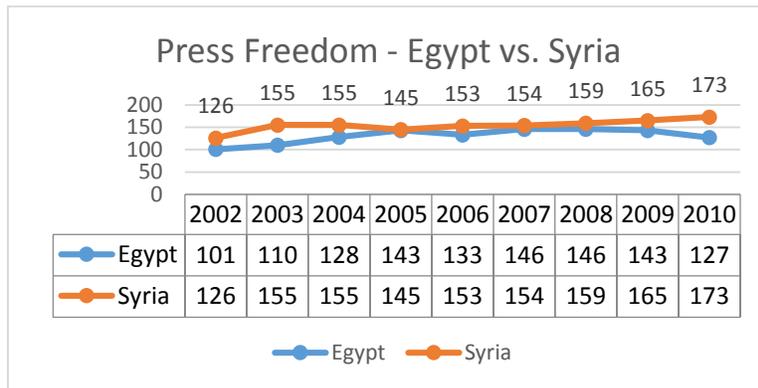


Figure-11: Egypt-Syria (2002-2014) Press Freedom Scores.
Reporters without Borders

2.3 Merit of the Regime’s Legitimizing Narrative

By inheriting power in monarchical fashion and by lacking charisma, Bashar al-Assad lacked legitimacy of his own and instead relied on Baathist rhetoric to derive legitimacy for his regime.¹²⁹ His government projected the image of supporting core Baathist secular principles and popular Arab causes in both its domestic and foreign policies. First, the regime claimed to have

¹²⁹ See for example: ‘Syria under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges’ *International Crisis Group*, Report No. 24, February 11, 2004

committed itself to maintaining internal stability and the peaceful coexistence of the dozens of ethnic and religious communities that make up the Syrian population.¹³⁰ Historically, the Baath party acquired substantial grassroots support for its protection of minorities and by guaranteeing coherence and domestic peace to an otherwise fractious and fragmented society. Second, the regime vowed to implement economic reforms and expand the economic opportunities to its traditional as well as its new constituency: the peasant and workers, and the new middle class.¹³¹ Lastly, and in terms of foreign policy and consistent with its resistance narrative, the regime pledged to back the Palestinian cause and oppose what it considers US hegemony in the region.¹³² To what extent did the regime live up to its legitimizing narrative? Was there a discrepancy between its promises and actions? Did its rhetoric match reality?

First, the regime delivered on its promises on maintaining domestic stability and the protection of minorities during Assad's tenure prior to the uprising, albeit at very high costs of state repression and suffocation of civil liberties. With the exception of the Syrian Kurds whom the state denied citizenship and the Muslim Brotherhood whom it deemed extreme, the rest of communities enjoyed equal rights and practiced their faiths freely.¹³³ Despite regime's flaws, Syria was renowned for its diverse and tolerant social tradition in a region mired with ethnic and religious conflicts. It is no wonder why most Syrian minority groups either remained neutral in the 2011

¹³⁰ Mainstream estimations show that the Syrian population comprises of 70% Sunni Muslims, 10% Alawi, 10% Christians and the remainder 10% include Druze, Ismaili and Shiites. Ethnically, 90% are Arabs, and the remaining 10% make up the rest of the non-Arab communities including the Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians and Turkomans. These sectarian and ethnic divisions are infused with class, regional and ideological differences.

¹³¹ Following the clampdown on the Damascus Spring and end of any pretense of political reforms, the regime shifted its slogan from "Reform and Renewal" to "Modernization and Development"; i.e., narrowing its reform agenda to the administrative and economic domains.

¹³² See for example Carsten Weiland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p.79-102

¹³³ See for example: 'Syria - Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2010' *US State Department*,

uprising and subsequent civil war, or supported the Bashar regime.¹³⁴ Amid the sustained mass upheavals, these communities chose the status quo and security provided by the state, fearing that the prospect of the regime's collapse would jeopardize religious peace, threaten domestic security and turn Syria into a second Iraq, in which ethnic and sectarian minorities bore the brunt of its civil war.¹³⁵ In fact, since the first days of the uprising, the regime has embarked on propaganda campaigns designed to depict protesters as armed foreign-backed radical Islamists determined to threaten Syria's minorities and shatter its inclusive society.¹³⁶ By stoking fear of potential sectarian violence even while the protests were still peaceful, the regime was reminding its citizens of the bargain it has kept all along: that the survival of minorities, and indeed of Syria, is inextricably intertwined with the survival of the regime.¹³⁷ Furthermore, both the chaos in Iraq and the frequent civil strife and political paralysis in Lebanon have "taught a new generation of Syrians to appreciate the stability and security of being ruled by a strong man."¹³⁸

Second, regarding the regime's economic opportunities for its core constituents, the limited and piecemeal privatization measures have yielded negative results despite economic growth, leading to increasing social inequality, rising unemployment, deteriorating productivity, degradation of social services, rampant corruption and a poor industrial base that made Syrian exports uncompetitive.¹³⁹ Traditionally, the Baath party allied with the peasants and workers

¹³⁴ See for example: Majid Rafizadeh 'For Syria's minorities, Assad is Security' *Al Jazeera*, September 16, 2011; Bastian Berbnner 'The Tolerant Dictator: Syria's Christians Side with Assad out of Fear' *Der Spiegel*, November 30, 2011

¹³⁵ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 90

¹³⁶ David Lesch argues "The Assads have skillfully played the minority card over the years, practically guaranteeing for themselves at least 20-30 percent loyal support base in the country by playing on fears of the potential for repressive Sunni Muslim rule and/or instability, in which minorities typically pay a high price." David Lesch, *Syria: the Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 51

¹³⁷ See for example: Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 16

¹³⁸ Fred H. Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria* (London: The London Middle East Institute at SOAS, 2010): p. 139

¹³⁹ See for example: Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p.25-27

against the urban notables and landowning families who controlled power and wealth.¹⁴⁰ However, the lack of development in rural areas, the neglect of peasants' labor rights, a mismanagement of resources and failure to address the catastrophic effects of the 2006-2010 droughts on Syria's agricultural sector have all led to the breakdown of Syria's social contract.¹⁴¹ By 2009, an estimated 800,000 peasants lost their livelihood and had to move to city slums.¹⁴² Emile Hokayem argues that Bashar's economic policies "ultimately, if unwittingly, created the conditions for an uprising by alienating the regime's traditional support base among the peasantry and the working classes."¹⁴³ In retrospect, it comes as no surprise that the uprising broke out in Deraa, a rural southern district also known as the "reservoir of the Baath," from which many of the Syrian Baathist rank and file come.

The "wage-earning middle class" represented the regime's other core constituency, which was largely dependent on the state for employment, provisions and benefits.¹⁴⁴ The government policies of slashing subsidies on basic goods, cutting public employment and failing to address inequality in income distribution deteriorated the safety net and hurt the middle class. Economic reforms spurred a takeoff in corruption and failed to create sufficient employment opportunities. The situation deteriorated to an extreme. Sadik Al Azm, Professor Emeritus at the University of Damascus, stated that "By 2009-2010, it was impossible to go about the day without repeatedly hearing from working people expressions such as 'All it needs is a match to ignite'; 'It needs a spark to flare up'; and 'All it needs is a fire-cracker to explode.'"¹⁴⁵ Worse, Assad promoted a

¹⁴⁰ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 64

¹⁴¹ Samir Sa'eefan 'Policies of Income Distribution and their Role in the Social Explosion in Syria' in *The Revolution's Background: Syrian Studies*, by multiple authors, pp. 95-146 (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013): p. 124-133; Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 10

¹⁴² Aron Lund 'Drought, Corruption and War: Syria's Agricultural Crisis' *Carnegie Center*, April 18, 2014

¹⁴³ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 28

¹⁴⁴ Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997): p.106

¹⁴⁵ Sadik Al Azm 'Syria in Revolt: Understanding the Unthinkable War' *Boston Review*, August 18, 2014

level of sectarian favoritism in the economy that was evident by the emergence of an excess of Alawite elites who dominated the market. This culminated with Bashar's cousin Rami Makhlouf, the hated billionaire and poster boy of Syria's corruption, assuming the role of gatekeeper to Syria's burgeoning private sector.¹⁴⁶ Such policies alienated part of the Sunni majority and undercut the regime's claims of secularism.¹⁴⁷ In fact, early in the uprising, protesters directed their wrath at Makhlouf by chanting slogans denouncing him as "thief" and burned down his business premises.¹⁴⁸

Third, and as Syria scholars are quick to point out, the Syrian regime used its foreign policy of supporting specific popular Arab causes to generate nationalist legitimacy.¹⁴⁹ True to its claims, backing the pro-Palestinian 'military resistance camp' (Hezbollah, Hamas) against Israel was a fixture of the Syrian foreign policy. Syria is the home of more than half a million Palestinian refugees, it hosts political offices of Palestinian organizations and the state-run media outlets cover the Palestinian issue extensively. However, Syria's aid to pro-Palestinian armed groups was not motivated by a rigid ideological stance, but rather by a pragmatic policy designed to create consensus domestically while showing sufficient flexibility to avoid dragging Syria into a direct confrontation with Israel.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, with the collapse of the Baathist regime in Iraq in 2003, Syria became the last bastion of Pan-Arabism, the main mouthpiece of popular Arab causes and ostensibly the only counterweight to Israel.¹⁵¹ Bashar al-Assad exploited anti-American sentiments in the region following the US occupation of Iraq as well as Israel's wars against Lebanon and

¹⁴⁶ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p.25, p.29

¹⁴⁷ See for example: Raymond Hinnebusch 'Syria: From 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?' *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, Issue 1, pp. 95-113 (2012): p. 99

¹⁴⁸ See for example: Khaled Yacoub Oweis 'Fear Barrier Crumbles in Syrian "Kingdom of Silence"' *Reuters*, March 22, 2011

¹⁴⁹ See for example: Raymond Hinnebusch 'Syria: From "Authoritarian Upgrading" to Revolution?' p. 103

¹⁵⁰ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p.80-81

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 84

Gaza (2006, 2008) to foster domestic support, boost his regional standing, reinforce his regime's resistance discourse and demonstrate its credentials as the staunchest defender of Arab rights.¹⁵²

Equally important, and consistent with its anti-imperialist narrative, Assad's regime opposed the US occupation of Iraq and undertook a strategy to save Syria from the threats of regime change and the destabilizing consequences of economic sanctions and international isolation. By supporting the Iraqi insurgency, Assad helped deepen the American quagmire in Iraq, thereby increasing the unpopularity of the war among Americans and diminishing the prospect of U.S. military action against Syria and its strategic ally Iran. As argued previously in this chapter, Assad's domestic and regional popularity rose significantly in the 2006-2010 period following what Arabs perceived as an Israeli strategic failure in the 2006 War with Lebanon, and the American decision to withdraw combat troops from Iraq, thus signaling the end (and failure) of President Bush's democratization project by way of regime change. Unlike the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Syria refused to negotiate a peace deal on Israeli terms, and was consistent on its principle of achieving "just and honorable peace with Israel."¹⁵³ Assad also "consistently refused to give in to what, in the region, was called the 'American project'."¹⁵⁴ His regime persevered in the face Western economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation implemented to force core policy changes in Damascus. On one major public address in the aftermath of the humiliating withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, Assad stated, "This region has two options: chaos or resistance...In the end, we are going to win, one way or another, even if it lasts a long

¹⁵² See for example: 'Reform in Syria: Steering between the Chinese model and Regime Change' *Carnegie Papers*, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, No. 69, July 2006, p. 14

¹⁵³ See for example: Frederic C. Hof 'Mapping Peace between Syria and Israel' *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 219, March 2009

¹⁵⁴ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 29

time.”¹⁵⁵ Carsten Wieland, recalls that by advocating confrontational policies that appealed to an Arab public, which culminated in a period of an Arab and Western détente with Syria come 2010,

The Syrian President became the hero, the only Arab leader between Bagdad and Casablanca who confronted a belligerent Bush Administration...The resistance discourse went down well and Assad enjoyed a period of almost unanimous domestic support.¹⁵⁶

In short, when assessing the regime’s self-legitimizing narrative by comparing its claims to what it delivered, the ‘balance sheet’ favors the regime. First, true to his core Baathist claims Assad delivered internal security and the protection of minorities during his presidency prior to the uprising. Syria remained a bastion of stability and tolerance compared to the sectarian strife in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon. On the economic domain, Assad failed to deliver on his promises, broke the social pact with his traditional and new constituency and shrank his social base. However, Carsten cautions, “despite caveats, the gap between rich and poor remained tolerable in Syria, especially in comparison to Egypt where slums were part of daily life. The residual socialism in Syria did not fail to have a social impact.”¹⁵⁷ The Syrian regime also pursued policies consistent with its resistance narrative, which resulted in the region-wide popularity it enjoyed despite its growing authoritarianism. Therefore, the Assad regime fared well to a great extent in matching its rhetoric and populist discourse with reality, from which it derived substantial nationalist legitimacy and political support.

In terms of discursive power, first the regime had adopted an official ideology from which it exercised dominant – but not hegemonic – control over society. Second, Syria was also one of

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in Andrew Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington’s Battle with Syria* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011): p. 118

¹⁵⁶ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 50

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 93

the world's most restrictive media environments where opposition activists, most of whom imprisoned or exiled, could neither challenge the regime's nationalist narrative nor garner domestic support.¹⁵⁸ Even during the uprisings and subsequent civil war, the regime maintained the backing of its political base constituted by minorities (particularly the Alawites, Christians, Druze and Kurds) as well as most of the Sunni oligarchy. Third, Assad fared well in delivering on his promises and hence validating the regime's narrative as protector of minorities and supporter of resistance causes. Therefore, the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad had a moderate or mid-level discursive power.

In conclusion, Bashar's regime enjoyed high institutional power but moderate discursive power. Therefore, his regime can be best described as highly consolidated. Next, this chapter will examine how such high authoritarianism influenced the regime's capacity to repress with impunity. More crucially, it will focus on whether the latter is a function of the former, as this research hypothesizes.

3. Regime Consolidation and the Costs of Repression

Figure-12 below graphs the relationship between Syria's level of consolidation and its political terror scores in the last 40 years prior to the uprising (1980-2010). The dotted trend line depicts a relationship between the two variables, suggesting that as an overall trend, there is to some extent a direct nonlinear relationship between the level of authoritarianism and the state's political violence. However, this relationship is spurious. First, under Hafiz, the regime maintained a POLITY IV score of -9 (and a score of -7 under Bashar) despite changes in its political terror

¹⁵⁸ See for example Fred H. Lawson (ed.) *Demystifying Syria*, p.138

scores. In fact, the repression scores oscillated between an average figure of 5 (the highest score in the scale) during the mid-1980s and at the peak of the Islamist insurgency to a score of 3 throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. This means that the regime was able to afford the political costs of applying different intensities of state repression without needing to first increase its level of authoritarianism. By contrast, when plotting said relationship within a shorter period (2000-2010), the resulting graph in Figure-13 shows a trend suggesting an inverse nonlinear relationship between the same variables. This indicates that potentially flawed measurements by POLITY IV and/or the Terror Scale as well as confounding factors had skewed the relationship.

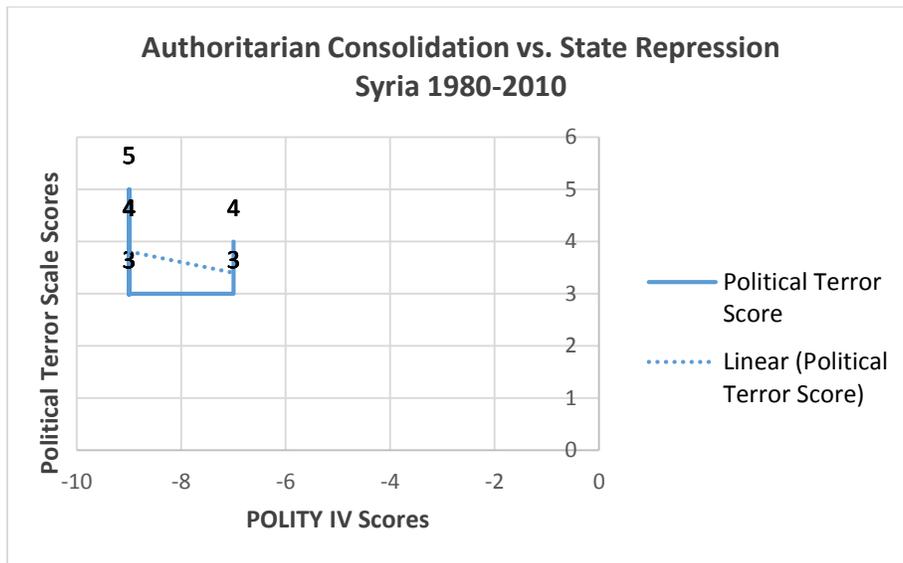


Figure-12: Syria's POLITY IV and Political Terror Scores

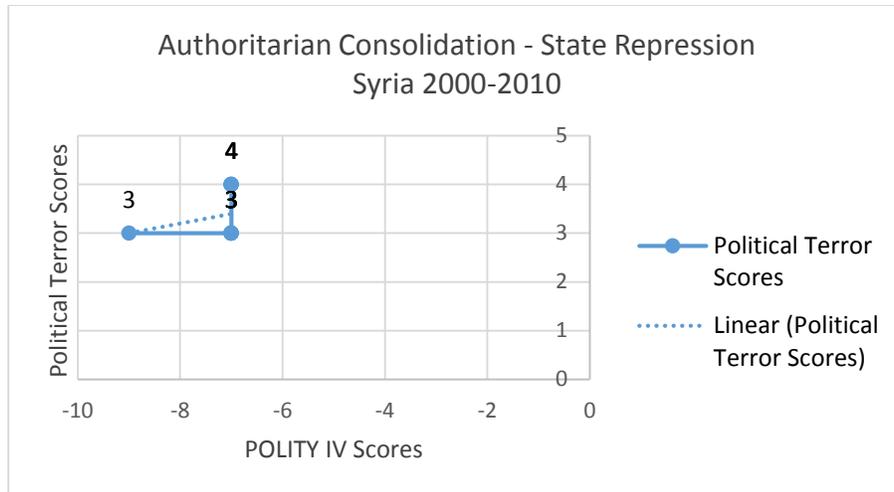


Figure-13: Syria's POLITY IV and Political Terror Scores

How did both Assads vary the degree of regime repression while maintain the same institutional grip over power? There are two possible explanations to this phenomenon. First, and as discussed earlier in this research and pointed out by many Syria experts, Hafiz sidelined the ruling Baath party from power and re-structured the military and security apparatus to ensure loyalty following the regime's defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in the 1980s. POLITY IV failed to register this increase in Assad's growing institutional monopoly over power and kept the same score of -9 throughout the Hafiz 30-year presidency. Second, Hafiz also channeled part of his increasing authoritarian rule discursively rather than institutionally as evidenced by the emergence and proliferation of state-sponsored personality cults, official rhetoric and symbolic displays of power beginning mid-1980s.

When Bashar became president, POLITY IV dropped Syria's score from -9 to -7 (i.e., indicating a less authoritarian regime) and maintained that score throughout his tenure in the 2000-2010 period. In reality, however, Bashar grew so much more authoritarian than his father that he gave up any pretense of power sharing with the ruling party, reduced the regime's core elite support

base and dispensed with any semblance of maintaining the sectarian balance that Hafiz preserved. Therefore, this observation calls into question the validity of the POLITY IV scale measurements. Like the Egyptian case, the POLITY IV Project seems to have established its scores for the Syrian regime based on *form* rather than on the *substance* of the political changes that occurred during the two Assads' tenures. In addition, Political Terror Index gave Bashar a score of 3 during the 2001-2006 period, hence failing to account for the increased level of repression following the crackdown on the Damascus Spring.

As with the Egyptian case study, the descriptive analysis below shows that permanent governance by emergency powers and a political culture tolerant of state repression constitutes the causal mechanism or pathway through which authoritarian consolidation shapes the regime's political costs of employing state repression.



3.1 Permanent Governance by Emergency Powers

The Syrian regimes governed under state of emergency since the ascent of the Baath party to power in 1963 until its nominal repeal in 2011. Emergency laws bestowed on the security forces sweeping powers to conduct preventive arrests, detain individuals without trial and commit a host of human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances and death of detainees in custody using vaguely and broadly defined offenses as rationale for these actions.¹⁵⁹ These

¹⁵⁹ See for example: 'A Wasted Decade' *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, p. 6

emergency powers are not subject to the scrutiny of judicial authority.¹⁶⁰ In addition, article 16 of Legislative Decree 14 (January 1969) protects security personnel from prosecution by charges of torture.¹⁶¹ By decree, Bashar extended this legal immunity to other security forces on September 30, 2008.¹⁶² Coercive institutions employed their wide-ranging authority to restrict civil liberties, repress political opponents, intimidate journalists and crack down on all forms of dissent. In fact, Assad enjoyed a power monopoly over the legislature and citing both national security threats and regional tumult as pretexts, enabled the Syrian regime to perpetuate the state of emergency and continue its systematic repressive measures. In 2010, the Human Rights Watch issued a scathing report detailing human rights violations under Bashar’s ten-year rule. It states, among other things, that

Ordinary Syrians continue to risk jail merely for criticizing their president, starting a blog, or protesting government policies... Syria’s security agencies, the feared *Mukhabarat*, continue to detain people without arrest warrant, frequently refuse to disclose their whereabouts for weeks and sometimes months, and regularly engage in torture... Syria’s courts continue to accept confessions obtained under torture... When human rights lawyers allege that their clients have been tortured, they risk being prosecuted for “spreading false information”, a criminal charge... Bashar al-Asad has done nothing to get rid of the practices of incommunicado detention, ill-treatment, and torture during interrogation, which remain common in Syria’s detention facilities.¹⁶³

Like its Egyptian counterpart but with seemingly much greater intensity, the Syrian regime used emergency laws and exceptional measures to circumvent judicial due process, to establish a parallel judicial system beyond institutional oversight, to provide a legal basis for its systematic

¹⁶⁰ ‘The Permanent State of Emergency – A Breeding Ground for Torture’ Report Submitted to the Committee Against Torture (CAT) in the context of the review of the initial periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic, *Al Karama*, 2010 Available from: <http://www.arabhumanrights.org/en/countries/shadow.aspx?cid=19>

¹⁶¹ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, p. 161

¹⁶² ‘A Wasted Decade’ *Human Rights Watch*, p. 20

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p.2-20

mukhabarat brutality and to immunize its security forces from legal accountability. In this political climate, the Syrian authorities confronted little political costs, if any, for its systematic use of extrajudicial violence against dissent and created a pervasive political culture that sanctioned state repression.

3.2 A Political Culture Tolerant of State Repression

Repression ranked first among the two Assads' instruments of authoritarian rule.¹⁶⁴ As most Syrians are quick to point out, political fear; i.e., the citizen's dread of punishment, their collective sense of powerlessness and culture of silence have been salient characteristics of life in the Assad regimes.¹⁶⁵ Pervasive security services and an efficient system of informers nurtured deep mistrust among the populace and reinforced this climate of fear.¹⁶⁶ People were encouraged to spy on one another and report any suspicious activities to the mukhabarat in order to escape collective punishment and demonstrate their loyalties.¹⁶⁷ State brutality fostered fear and a popular sense that it was futile to resist or protest the state's repressive policies. More importantly "many Syrians had internalized the regime's rhetoric about the risk of disorder if the regime were not present to defend social peace at home."¹⁶⁸ The normalization of fear and routinization of government violence "buttressed the Assad security state for four decades" and "convinced most people to submit to the status quo."¹⁶⁹ The Syrian authorities exploited external threats, regional

¹⁶⁴ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 33

¹⁶⁵ Wendy Pearlman 'Trajectories of Fear in Syria' *Equality Development and Globalization Studies (EDGS) Working Paper*, No. 13, Northwestern University, February 14, 2014, p. 2-6

¹⁶⁶ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 17

¹⁶⁷ Nawaf Faris, former Syrian intelligence officer argues, argued that "Syria is an intelligence state par excellence...people, from school janitors to the vice-president spy on each other. The regime was built on a security basis to serve the president." Interview. *Without Borders Program*, Al Jazeera Arabic, August 8, 2012

¹⁶⁸ Steven Heydemann 'Eyes on the Prize' *Foreign Policy*, April 4, 2011, p.8

¹⁶⁹ Wendy Pearlman 'Trajectories of Fear in Syria' p. 16-17

tumult and foreign policy challenges to justify its suppressive measures and its intolerance of dissent. It was no surprise that many analysts initially believed that Syria would be immune to the Arab Spring revolutionary tide due in large part to the regime's notorious violent behavior. Indeed, calls for protests on Syrian streets immediately following the Egyptian uprising failed to take off. Suhair Atassi, a leading Syrian female political activist who later became the Vice-President of the opposition government (2012-2013) argued prior to the uprising that "Syria has for many years been a 'Kingdom of Silence'...Fear is dominating people's lives, despite poverty, starvation and humiliation. We do not expect that people can easily break the barrier of fear and silence."¹⁷⁰ Nadim Houry, a Human Rights Watch researcher based in Lebanon argued then that "people in Syria are a lot more afraid of the government and the security forces than they were in Egypt...in the Syrian psyche, the repression of the regime is taken as a given."¹⁷¹ On the onset of the Syrian uprising, Sadik Al Azm commented:

I was fearful at first that the regime would crush it almost instantly, given its legendary ferocity and repressiveness. Like other Syrian intellectuals, I felt total impotence before this devouring monster, which precluded any thought of an imminent, or even possible, collective 'no'.¹⁷²

In the two Assads' Syria, the people acquiesced to state violence, and the security forces became habituated to repressing with impunity. Ajami argued, "for four long decades, the Assad dynasty, the intelligence barons, and the brigade commanders had grown accustomed to a culture of quiescence and silence."¹⁷³ During interrogation and torture, Syrian security officers often questioned their detainees: "Why do you

¹⁷⁰ 'Q&A: Syrian Activist Suhair Atassi' *Aljazeera*, February 9, 2011.

¹⁷¹ Cajsa Wikstrom 'Syria: a Kingdom of Silence' *Aljazeera*, February 9, 2011.

¹⁷² Sadik Al Azm 'Syria in Revolt: Understanding the Unthinkable War' *Boston Review*, August 18, 2014

¹⁷³ Ajami, *the Syrian Rebellion*, p. 10

bother to criticize, oppose, and protest, when you know we are invincible, with a will of steel that crushes anything and anyone that stands in its way? Find something better to do than dabbling in hopeless politics and opposition.”¹⁷⁴ David Lesch states,

the mukhabarat have been given a tremendous amount of leeway to ensure domestic stability and to protect the regime...Most Syrians know where the ‘red lines’ are in terms of what not to say or do, but the Mukhabarat appear to have no red lines... After all, it was their collective hubris in arresting and manhandling the Deraa schoolchildren that launched the uprising.¹⁷⁵

In a similar vein, Philippe Droz-Vincent describes this fear-repression complex in the Syrian political environment,

Repression entailed an enduring securitization and brutalization of public life through various forms, from the insidious bullying and extortion by civil servants or lay policemen, to the day-to-day predation by local administration and security services, to the fear of repression for those refusing tacit allegiance (in public spaces, as the regime cared less about the private sphere), to open repression that has remained active against opponents even in the 2000s under Bashar al-Assad, and to the continuing repression of the “emergency laws.” Security services, such as the dreaded mukhabarat, or secret police, have played an essential role in the Syrian polity: they do not just exert a classic function of political repression as their name would imply, but they are essential to numerous administrative steps in daily life.¹⁷⁶

The collective trauma of the Hama massacres changed state-society relations and contributed to entrenching this political culture of state violence and impunity.¹⁷⁷ By late 1970s, a deteriorating economy and intervention in the Lebanese civil war damaged Hafiz al-Assad’s political standing. Worst, a segment of Sunni conservatives declared al-Assad’s rule as illegitimate since he hailed from the Alawite sect, long considered heretics by Sunni orthodoxy. Soon after,

¹⁷⁴ Sadik Al Azm ‘Syria in Revolt: Understanding the Unthinkable War’ *Boston Review*, August 18, 2014

¹⁷⁵ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 66

¹⁷⁶ Philippe Droz-Vincent ‘State of Barbary (Take Two): From the Arab Spring to the Return of Violence in Syria’ *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 68, No. 1, pp. 33-58 (Winter 2014): p. 37-38

¹⁷⁷ Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Assad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1990): p. 327

the mounting popular discontent grew into open dissent. The armed offshoot of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood targeted Alawites and government institutions and when Assad escaped an assassination attempt, he responded with a massive nationwide brutal crackdown. When the regime cornered the armed Islamists fighters in Hama, the security forces flattened the city, massacred between 25,000-40,000 people and left an indelible mark on the Syrian collective memory of how the regime reacts to insurrection.¹⁷⁸ Public discussion of the bloodbath was banned but the ‘ghosts’ of Hama were never laid to rest. Essentially, the regime had the Syrian people “beaten into submission” and hence grew more confident of its capacity to repress without accountability.¹⁷⁹ Azmi Bishara, a political scientist and General Director of the Arab Center of Research and Policy Studies in Qatar, argued that the people who had rebelled against Bashar al-Assad were largely those of a young generation who did not witness the state-led terror of the 1980s.¹⁸⁰

4. Findings and Conclusions

This chapter sought to investigate the hypothesis that as *regime consolidation increases*, *the political costs of state repression decreases*. Mapping measures of authoritarianism against state repression has shown that the relationship is spurious due to confounding factors and flawed measures by both, the POLITY IV and Political Terror indices. Similar to the Egyptian case study, a descriptive analysis found that regime consolidation enabled the regime to employ the power of the law to repress with impunity. More specifically, the greater the regime’s dominance over the

¹⁷⁸ See for example: Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): p. 59

¹⁷⁹ Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 136

¹⁸⁰ Azmi Bishara, *Syria: a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 45

state's institutions and resources, the greater its capacity to employ emergency authority to accomplish arbitrary violence in the name of national security. Consolidation over coercive powers enabled Syrian authorities to secure the loyalty of the security forces and link their institutional survival to that of the regime. Consolidation over economic power maintained a solid base among the populace through an extensive web of patronage, clientelistic networks and self-enrichment practices. Consolidation over the judicial power provided the Syrian government with a constitutional cover that allowed it to employ repression at will and immunized its personnel from the reach of the law. Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest, in both the Egyptian and Syrian cases, that autocratic consolidation has *some* influence over a regime's capacity to afford the political costs of state repression, which corroborates the views expressed in the existing literature. However, there are several reasons why this research can neither make strong causal claims nor generalize the findings.

First, inverse causality remains a major problem in the study of institutions, politics and state conflict behavior. As all Syria scholars emphasize, the violent clampdown on the uprising in the early 1980s helped Assad consolidate his grip over power, and this in turn silenced the opposition and increased the regime's capacity to repress with little or no accountability. Therefore, not only does increasing the level of authoritarianism have *some* effect on state repression, but also the inverse is true. Politics, as part of social life, is a complex system (open, dynamic, interactive, interdependent, and nonlinear) in which agents, institutions and their components interact simultaneously and produce outcomes that are not the sum total of their inputs. This process of interaction and the networks that connect all the components are also part

of the system, and hence it is quite difficult to separate any given component (say, state repression) from other parts of the system.¹⁸¹

Secondly, both case studies have shown that the POLITY IV Project and Political Terror Index (PTI) have at times provided inaccurate scores. For example, POLITY IV assigned Hafiz al-Assad's 30-year regime the same score throughout, which does not reflect the reality of how the Syrian dictator grew more authoritarian during his tenure. In addition, the PTI failed to register an increase in state-led violence following the crackdown on the Damascus Spring, thereby misrepresenting the state repression scores and skewing the graphical relationship between the research variables. In addition, regional turmoil, external threats of regime change, Assad's popularity, Syria's nationalist discourse of supporting the Palestinian resistance and preserving internal stability are among the factors that enabled the Syrian regime to rationalize its domestic and foreign policies and afford the costs of repressing dissent. Therefore, one must acknowledge that several factors are at work when assessing the relationship between a regime's authoritarian consolidation and its capacity to repress without *ex post* punishment.

Having established that the Assad regime was highly authoritarian and that consolidation has some effect on repression, the next chapter explores how the regime's political costs of state repression influenced the government's conflict behavior at the onset of contentious collective action.

¹⁸¹ Hilton Root, *Dynamics Among Nations: The Evolution of Legitimacy and Developments in Modern States* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013): p. 52

Chapter 11

Contentious Collective Action and State Policy Response

This chapter tackles the second hypothesis: the lower the costs of state repression, the more likely the government will employ violent repression rather than engage in accommodative strategies. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the regime will continue to employ violence against protesters as long as the political costs incurred from employing such violence are lower than the costs of offering policy concessions. Since the Syrian regime is highly authoritarian, it is postulated that at the onset of the civil uprisings, the lower political costs helped convince the regime leadership of the high probability of defeating the uprisings using state repression. Essentially, the government is likely to reject demands for political reforms and repress its way out of the crisis in order to maintain its political survival.

This chapter will help demystify what seems like the regime's puzzling crisis behavior. For example, why did Assad commit to a policy that gambled with his legacy, political survival, personal life and the national survival of the state? Why did he persist in maintaining his tight grip on power even at the expense of destroying Syria? What was the rationale for adopting the 'Samson option', i.e., risk smashing Syria on top of everyone's head? Since the onset of the uprising in 2011, Assad's policy decisions have torn the fabric of society asunder, fractured the country across multiple fault lines, helped incubate violent global jihadism, inspired local ethnic and sectarian separatism, disillusioned many of the minority communities that form Assad's constituency and thus irrevocably undermined the regime's legitimacy. The regime confronted serious setbacks on the battlefield and was on the verge of a collapse that prompted Russian military intervention to

save Assad and his government.¹ Throughout this crisis, there was a point at which “well-meaning optimists argued that the state would wake up eventually and, for self-preservation if nothing else, do something to avert the worst.”² That moment never occurred; rather, the regime continued to push the country into an abyss by escalating the violence into a full-fledged civil war. Most analysts have argued that Syria has reached a point of no return to the status quo ante. This chapter examines the Syrian regime’s seemingly self-defeating strategy.

As will be illustrated in this and other chapters, the Assad regime did not stumble from one policy miscalculation to another only to find itself inadvertently in the midst of a civil war. Rather, by admission of numerous former government top officials, the Syrian leadership premeditated its crisis response of relentless crackdowns on the protesters with the sole objective of militarily defeating the uprising, knowing well that such strategy carried the risk of escalating the violence into a protracted conflict. Given the lower costs of repression to the regime, Assad calculated that suppressing the uprising was a highly plausible prospect. He also reckoned that employing disproportionate violence against the dissenting populace would provoke people to take up arms against the state and ultimately radicalize the peaceful civilian activists. In turn, the Syrian government used these developments as pretexts to stigmatize the uprising, justify its security-heavy responses and validate its narrative, i.e. that it had been fighting foreign-backed terrorism all along.³ Most importantly, the civil war and the proliferation of terrorist groups became Assad’s self-fulfilling prophecy enabling him to present the Syrians and the international community with

¹ See for example: Ian Black ‘Wake-up Call on Syria Army Weakness Prompted Russian Intervention’ *The Guardian*, October 1, 2015.

² Sadik Al Azm ‘Syria in Revolt: Understanding the Unthinkable War’ *Boston Review*, August 18, 2014

³ See for example: Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 57

a stark choice: that of an authoritarian stability or a violent theocratic rule that threatens global security.

By early June 2011, armed soldiers, defecting from the army, began fighting the Assad regime who, in turn, engaged in reprisal attacks. On July 29, the Free Syrian Army announced its formation. This research only looks at state crisis responses to *non-violent* anti-regime protests, as in the case of Egypt. The element of violence in protests changes the regime's calculus significantly, making concessions seem a less attractive policy options. In addition, it would be difficult for any researcher to identify what really motivated the regime's repressive response to *armed* protests: Was the response due to the low political costs of state repression to the regime (as this research claims), or was it a warranted retaliation to armed attacks by rebels? Discerning the regime's intent behind its policy choices is a critical factor in proving or disproving the hypothesis of this research. Therefore, this project will examine the Syrian policy responses when the protests were peaceful, specifically, from the onset of the uprising on March 18 to June 9, 2011, staying clear of the threshold when the uprising began to take the form of an armed rebellion.

This chapter will disaggregate the first three months of the uprising into several crises, each spanning a period of a week (i.e., $n = 12$) and analyze the dynamics of contention–state policy response to test the above-mentioned hypothesis.⁴ The first part of this chapter examines the government's policy choices to each crisis and potentially identify whether or not the regime reached its point of maximum repression; i.e.; when repression reached a *prohibitive threshold*. By studying the patterns of government policy choices, the study attempts to infer the influence of state repression in the crisis decision calculus. The second part digs deeper through top officials'

⁴ Breaking up the uprising into 12 sets of one-week long crisis proved to be an appropriate framework in capturing the action-reaction dynamics and facilitating the case analysis.

testimonies, Human Rights reports and available sources of evidence to establish the motives behind Assad's regime crisis decisions. Finally, the last part synthesizes and analyzes the findings.

1. The State's Concession-Repression Pattern

It is important to briefly describe the environment leading up to the crisis. By 2008, Bashar emerged triumphant from domestic and foreign policy challenges, consolidated his grip over power and enjoyed regional popularity. However, he failed to use his political capital to implement long delayed political reforms. Instead, Bashar grew more authoritarian and state institutions continued to decay. Rapacious corruption, deteriorating social services, failing economy, suffocation of civic freedoms, torture by the security services, violations of dignity and unaccountable violence had all reached unbearable proportions. Syria was sitting on a powder keg, and seemed no different from Tunisia, Egypt and Libya whose socioeconomic ills fueled the popular uprisings. Syria's authoritarian rule had produced plenty of unemployed, disaffected and hopeless youth who had nothing to lose and had no stake in the status quo. On January 26, a Syrian from the northeastern city of al-Hasaka set himself on fire evoking the self-immolation Mohammed Bouazizi of Tunisia. The uprisings in the region began to break the barrier of fear and encouraged activists, mainly from outside Syria, to call for a 'Day of Rage' on February 4-5. However, fear and intimidation by the security forces prevented the calls for mobilization from eliciting public response. The Syrian authorities also swiftly dispersed vigils in front of the Egyptian and Libyan Embassies and conducted pre-emptive arrests of activists suspected of painting anti-regime slogans.

Amid the regional tumult in late January 2011, Assad gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal*. In this interview, he expressed support for protesters in other Arab states and argued that “if you didn’t see the need for reform before what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, it’s too late to do any reform” and that “Syria is stable... Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.”⁵ Bashar was referring to his popular foreign policy that advocated core Arab causes, thereby contrasting himself with other leaders who were out of touch with their people and were regionally perceived as Western lackeys. Assad was so confident that his nationalist and anti-Western posture would insulate him from domestic unrest that his government lifted restrictions on social media (YouTube, Facebook, and Bloggers) on February 8, amidst the popular wave convulsing the region. The regime’s intelligence also contacted prominent opposition figures and directly threatened them with violent measures if they called for protests.⁶

A week after the Egyptian people deposed Mubarak, Syrians like other people in the region, felt the revolution in the air. On February 17, 2011, a policeman beat the son of a shop owner in the commercial neighborhood of Hariqa in Central Damascus. People gathered in a large crowd in support of the victim and chanted, “the Syrian people will not be humiliated.” This was unprecedented in Assad’s Mukhabarat state, but it was emblematic of how volatile the public mood had become after decades of frustration. Instead of firing at the protesters, the interior minister, Major Gen. Said Sammur, drove to the site, spoke to protesters, personally punished the offender and promised to provide redress to the victim. Suddenly, the tune changed and the crowd began praising the president, “with our souls and blood we will fight for you, Bashar.” In describing the incident, an *International Crisis Group* (ICG) report argued “had the police shot at the protesters

⁵ Jay Solomon and Bill Spindle ‘Syria Strongman: Time for Reform’ *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011

⁶ Azmi Bishara, *A Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 230

in the historical heart of Damascus, the uprising could have started then and there.”⁷ Weiland also argued that had “the authorities reacted in a similar fashion vis-à-vis subsequent protests, an escalation of violence may have been averted.”⁸

There are multiple sources used in this chapter to describe the crisis events and the respective state responses.⁹ The number of people killed during the crisis provides the measure of state repression. The study uses a nominal scale (see Appendix B) to measure policy concessions.

Crisis 1: March 15-24

On March 6, a number of children between the ages of nine and fifteen painted anti-regime graffiti on a school’s walls in the southern rural town of Deraa. The local political security chief, General Atef Najib (a cousin of Bashar al-Assad) detained the minors. When the families pleaded for their release, Najib insulted them, told them to forget about their children and go “make new ones” and added: “if you can’t, bring me your wives (to make them pregnant)!”¹⁰ After being

⁷ ‘Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution’ *International Crisis Group*, Report N°108 –July 6, 2011, p. 10

⁸ Carsten Weiland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 17

⁹ These sources include a book, based on extensive interviews of Syrian activists, former top officials, opposition members, defected commanders and soldiers: *Syria: A Path to Freedom from Suffering*, by Azmi Bishara published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

For day to day events, the research used the following sources: Syria Profile – Timeline, *BBC News*; Syrian Civil War, *Encyclopedia Britannica*; Timeline of Key events in Syrian Uprising, *Politico*; Timeline of Syria’s Raging War, *Aljazeera*; Syria uprising: Timeline, *The Telegraph*; Uprising in Syria, *Los Angeles Times*; A timeline of some key events in Syrian uprising, *The Associated Press*; Syria conflict: 10 Months that Drove the Crisis Forward, *The Guardian*; Syria Conflict Timeline: 34 Months of Civil War, *International Business Times*; Syrian Uprising-Timeline of Key Events, *Mint Press News*

¹⁰ This incident is widely reported, see for example: Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, p. 183; Carsten Wieland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 20

released by the government, families discovered that their children had been tortured and that they bore visible signs of beatings, burns and pulling out of fingernails.¹¹

Activists spread word of the incident through social media, established the “Syrian Revolution 2011” Facebook page and called for a mass mobilization on March 18, which they dubbed the “Friday of Dignity.” On March 15, hundreds of people demonstrated in front of the Omari Mosque and called for the prosecution of government officials. When officials killed protesters, their funerals drew more people onto the streets that chanted, “The blood of our martyrs won’t be forgotten.” March 18 marked a critical turning point when pro-democracy demonstrations chanting “God, Syria, Freedom” and “no fear after today” spread countrywide, with the exception of the small protests in Aleppo and Damascus where the regime maintained a heavy security presence. People denounced Rami Makhlouf, attacked regime symbols including police stations and Baath party offices and demanded the release of detained protesters and the end of corruption. In Deraa, activists declared March 21 a day of general strike and dozens of detained protesters went on hunger strikes.

The State’s Response

From the start, Assad’s strategy aimed at preventing protesters from gathering and occupying public squares. ‘Tahrir’ and ‘Change’ squares in Egypt and Tunisia were the focal point of the uprisings that toppled the dictators of both regimes. On March 15, the security forces shot at protesters, killing two. Funeral processions drew large demonstrations. On Friday, March 18, the regime mobilized the anti-terror

Repression	
Killed	63

Concessions	
Forming a committee to study reforms	

¹¹ See for example: ‘2011 Human Rights Reports: Syria’ *U.S. Department of State*, May 24, 2012

squad and rapid response teams to isolate Deraa and suppress the protests.¹² When worshippers began chanting anti-regime slogans at the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus, security employed brute force to disperse the gathering. On March 20, the president sent his envoy (Major General Hisham Ikhtiyar, Bashar's national security advisor) to meet with local leaders and urge calm. Ikhtiyar threatened that he would “break the town on their head” if they did not stop protesting.¹³ Police clashed with demonstrators in many cities and towns, killing dozens and injuring hundreds. On March 23, Assad’s forces sealed off Deraa, cut off basic services including water, electricity and mobile phone networks.

The government also targeted civilians who filmed the protests or uploaded them on YouTube.¹⁴ Plainclothes police arrested hundreds of activists. The state-media described demonstrators as armed gangs, instigators and traitors. On March 24, the government announced the formation of a committee to investigate unlawful killings and promised to raise wages 20-30 percent, cut income taxes and increase pensions.¹⁵ The committee would also study healthcare, and the possibility of judicial and political reforms including lifting the state of emergency. Most Syrians saw these measures as diversionary and delaying tactics since Bashar enjoyed enormous executive powers to implement these reforms immediately by presidential decree.¹⁶

¹² Azmi Bishara, *a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 86

¹³ *ibid*, p. 88

¹⁴ Carsten Weiland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 24

¹⁵ See for example: David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 70

¹⁶ Bishara argues that “what most observers don’t realize is that the Syrian people do not consider changes in regulations and laws as real changes since they know that the regime does not rule by law, but rather it places itself and its institutions above the law. Therefore, when Syrians hear changes in laws, they know that it is not news, even if the opposition demanded these changes.” Bishara, *a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 107

Crisis 2: March 25-31

On March 25, the ‘Friday of Glory’, protests erupted in most Syrian towns and cities including Homs, Hama, Riqqa, Latakia and Rif Damascus. In Deraa, an estimated hundred thousand people demonstrated in the main square, chanted anti-regime slogans, staged a sit-in and set fire to local government offices. In response to the regime’s accusations, protesters held slogans reading, “The traitor is the one who kills his own people,” “Not terrorism, we want freedom” and “Bashar step down.” By now, activists have started recording footage of protests with their cell phones and uploading them on YouTube or sending them to satellite news channels such as Aljazeera to be aired in real time.¹⁷

The State’s Response

Assad’s forces clashed with protesters, killing dozens. On March 26, the government released a number of political prisoners, mostly Islamists.¹⁸

On March 29, the regime organized large demonstrations in major cities

expressing support for Bashar who had ordered the government to resign as a concession. The next day, he gave his first televised speech. The speech was widely described as delusional, dismal and a disappointment. Assad described the unrest as the work of terrorists backed by external forces, brandished his government’s nationalist and pan-Arab credentials and then dwelt on popular traditional themes in Syria, i.e. conspiracy theories.¹⁹ Assad argued, “I am sure you all know that

Repression	
Killed	45
Concessions	
Release of prisoners	
Resignation of Gov.	

¹⁷ ‘The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution’ *International Crisis Group*, p. 10

¹⁸ See for example: Leila Fadel ‘Syria’s Assad Moves to Allay Fury after Security Forces Fire on Protesters’ *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2011

¹⁹ David Lesch explains that this “conspiratorial mindset [in Syria] is commonplace even among the educated elite, many of whom attended university in the West. The problem is that there have been just enough foreign conspiracies in Syria over the decades to lend credence to such claims. And the regime of both Hafiz and Bashar al-

Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country...They will say that we believe in the conspiracy theory. In fact, there is no conspiracy theory...there is a conspiracy.” He also added “the Holy Qur’an says “sedition is worse than killing,” so all those involved intentionally or unintentionally in it contribute to destroying their country. So there is no compromise or middle way in this.” By placing the blame on external forces and labeling the protests as terrorist activities, Assad justified his regime’s lethal crackdown and precluded any possibility of compromise. In fact, he stressed that his reforms were part of the government’s agenda (since the Baath Party conference in 2005) and not a response to protests. Assad said, “if we say that these [reforms] were made under the pressure of certain conditions or popular pressure, this is weakness. And I believe that if the people get the government to bow under pressure, it will bow to foreign pressure.”²⁰

Crisis 3: April 1-7

Deraa remained under tight military siege and families began complaining of shortages of supplies. On April 1, the ‘Friday of Martyrs’, protests grew in several cities in retaliation to Assad’s uncompromising speech, chanting, “we want freedom” and “people want the downfall of the regime.” Syria is now gripped by nationwide revolutionary sentiment. By this time, activists had established local coordination committees across the country to organize the peaceful protests and

Assad have nurtured this paranoia through propaganda and censorship, in part to justify the necessity of the security state. So the Syrian president probably figured he was preaching to the converted...”

David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 81-82

²⁰ Complete transcript of President Bashar’s first speech on March 30, 2011:

<http://www.voltairenet.org/article169245.html>

document state brutality. The daily violence in Syria became the centerpiece of much of the global media coverage, particularly Aljazeera and Al Arabia.

The State's Response

Security units opened fire on protesters, arrested hundreds of activists and prevented demonstrators of nearby towns from breaking the siege in Deraa. On April 3, Assad sent a representative to Douma to reduce tensions: he promised local leaders that corpses would be returned, injured activists treated and that mourners would stop being targeted.²¹ On April 6, Assad sacked the governor of Deraa. On April 8, the government granted citizenship to 250,000 stateless Kurds and made the Kurdish New Year (Norooz) a national holiday. For Assad, these were important policies to secure the support of the Kurds, who represent 10 percent of the Syrian population. To mollify Sunni conservatives, the government repealed the ban on female teachers wearing the *niqab* and rehired those who it had already fired. It also announced the closure of the only casino in Syria and allowed the formation of a government-friendly Islamist party.²²

Repression	
Killed	26
Concessions	
Fired Deraa governor	
Granted Kurds citizenship	
Repealed ban on <i>niqab</i>	
Rehired teachers	
Allowed formation of Islamist party	
Closed down casino	

²¹ See for example: Phil Sands 'Syria President appoints new government, orders protesters freed from Jail' *The National*, April 15, 2011

²² David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 83 - 84

Crisis 4: April 8-14

On April 8, the “Friday of Steadfastness,” people gathered in the largest protests across Syria as hundreds of thousands came to the streets after prayer and engaged in running battles with police forces. On April 10, Nasser al-Hariri, a Syrian MP, appeared on the Aljazeera Channel and he accused the Syrian forces of killing protesters and called on Bashar al-Assad to exercise his responsibility and stop the bloodshed.²³ The government claimed the protestors had killed a number of its soldiers. Funerals for fallen protesters in the cities of Tartous, Idlib, Harasta, Baniyas, and Qamishli attracted large protests in their main squares. And as security deteriorated, many activists began organizing makeshift clinics and checkpoints, documented victims of homicide and gave interviews to international media outlets.

The State’s Response

Soldiers used live ammunition against protesters, cordoned off many towns and banned foreign journalists from traveling outside Damascus. State-run media continued to repeat the regime’s narrative of foreign-backed

Repression	
Killed	17
Concessions	
NIL	

armed groups wreaking havoc on Syria. Similar to Deraa, the government laid siege on the port city of Baniyas and shut off basic services. In Deraa, the government banned the call to prayers and security forces occupied the mosques. There were leaked videos aired by Aljazeera and Al Arabia channels showing soldiers violently beating handcuffed protesters and telling them “you want freedom? This is freedom.”

²³ Bishara, *a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 102

Crisis 5: April 15-21

April 15, the “Friday of Resolve,” witnessed demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins nationwide demanding regime change. By now, Friday prayers, funerals and bloodshed became rallying points for more protests, thus the uprising gained self-sustaining momentum. Activists in the suburb of Damascus mobilized thousands of protesters to march towards the capital’s center. In Homs, thousands occupied the Clock square and chanted “freedom or death.”

The State’s Response

Security forces continued to crackdown on dissent and detain prominent opposition figures. Intelligence units and state-funded militias, called *shabiha*, dispersed the large sit-in in the central square in Homs, killing dozens. They also fired at protesters who were marching towards central Damascus. State media accused armed Salafists of waging Jihad to erect a theocratic state in Syria. As a concession, the Syrian president installed a new government.

Repression	
Killed	59

Concessions	
Lift the state of Emergency	
Abolished Supreme State Security Courts	

On April 16, Assad gave his second speech to the nation before the newly sworn-in cabinet. He spoke profusely about the socioeconomic problems and despair that may have pushed the youth “to revolt against family, social and national values.” He declared the lifting of the emergency law and abolishment of Supreme State Security Courts (both went into effect on April 21) and advocated ‘broad dialogue’ between the government and the people.²⁴ These measures proved only nominal since violence continued unabated. In his speech, Assad described three major components stating, “There is the conspiracy. There are the reforms and the needs.” As for the

²⁴ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 84

conspiracy, he said, “we shouldn’t give this component a lot of attention. What’s important for us is...the reforms we are carrying out and the needs of the Syrian population.”²⁵ In other words, Bashar would decide the nature of *reforms* based on what his government perceived as the Syrian *needs* and hence would not cave in to the demands of protesters who were seen as no more than domestic co-conspirators. By now, the opposition was convinced that Assad was not serious about genuine change given the regime’s rhetoric about ‘broad dialogue’ but effectivity monopolizing the choice of reforms and how they would be implemented.

Crisis 6: April 22-28

April 22, the “Great Friday,” saw the largest protests across Syrian towns calling for Assad’s removal. The Syrian people had visibly broken the barrier of fear despite the government’s harsh suppression. Regime symbols such as statues of Hafiz al-Assad, pictures of Bashar and Baath party offices remained major protest targets. In a show of support for the plight of Deraa residents, thousands of protesters from nearby towns marched towards the city, attempting to break the military blockade. Two Syrian MPs, Khalil al-Rifai and Nasser al-Hariri resigned as a protest for the government’s brutal response in Deraa. The military suffered casualties and blamed “armed groups” for their losses.

²⁵ Complete transcript of President Bashar’s Second Speech on April 16, 2011:
http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/bashar_assad_speech_110416.htm

The State's Response

“Great Friday” was the deadliest day since the uprising began; the security forces killed more than 100 protesters in Deraa alone. The government blamed foreign media, specifically Aljazeera, for inflaming the insurrection and expelled foreign journalists. Huge pro-Assad rallies continued in Damascus. Government officials began using the term “Takfiri groups” (rather than gangs and instigators) to describe protesters. By this time, the regime was in a state of war fighting for its survival: it had mobilized the military and irregulars, surrounded restive areas, set up checkpoints, installed snipers on roofs, imposed curfews and began shelling towns.

Repression	
Killed	253
Concessions	
NIL	

On April 25, and in a dramatic escalation of the crisis, the 4th armored division of the Republican Guards raided the Mosques in Deraa and massacred dozens of protesters. Activists had converted mosques into headquarters for protests and makeshift hospitals. Soldiers also conducted security sweeps and detained hundreds. When the siege eased, people found the mosques desecrated, finding empty alcohol bottles and graffiti mocking the Islamic faith with words such as “Your God is Bashar” and “There is no God but Bashar.”²⁶

Crisis 7: April 29 – May 5

The harsh crackdown in Deraa galvanized greater demonstrations in many parts of Syria, including Kurdish towns in the north and, for the first time, downtown Damascus. On April 29, the “Friday of Rage,” protests grew in size and organization and demonstrators chanted in solidarity with the Deraa residents saying, “with our souls and blood, we will sacrifice for Deraa.”

²⁶ See for example: Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 74

One hundred and thirty eight Baath Party members resigned in protests of the regime's uncompromising response. Activists defied curfews, pledged to press on with their uprising and continued to challenge the regime's narrative in the global media.

The State's Response

Assad's forces continued shelling buildings, detaining activists and firing at protesters. In addition to Deraa, the military laid siege on Homs and began converging troops on Baniyas. The Syrian government persisted in its media offensive against the popular mobilization and had officially adopted the term "terrorist groups" in describing anti-government demonstrations. A massive campaign of arrests prompted the authorities to turn public buildings including schools and stadiums into ad hoc detention facilities. In anticipation of larger crowds on Friday, government forces seemed determined to show force to deter participation in the protests.

Repression	
Killed	161
Concessions	
NIL	

Crisis 8: May 6-12

By May 6, the "Friday of Challenge," most of the Syrian towns and cities were in full-scale revolt as hundreds of thousands poured into the streets demanding the overthrow of Assad's regime. The regime reported attacks on its military checkpoints that led to casualties among its soldiers. Protests, sit-ins and strikes had brought Syria into a standstill and many towns, occupied by the military, had turned into war zones.

The State's Response

The military laid siege on several rebellious cities including Baniyas, Hama, Homs, Tafas and al-Hara. It also restricted access into Damascus and conducted massive security raids. Many opposition leaders escaped the country and thousands of civilians began seeking refuge in Lebanon as the fighting intensified.

Repression	
Killed	82
Concessions	
NIL	

Crisis 9: May 13-19

May 13, or the “Friday of Free Women,” sparked a wave of nationwide anger escalating the crisis to an unprecedented scale as both protests and state repressive response increased in intensity. The conflict began to take a sharp sectarian tone with reports of regime Alawite militias clashing with Sunni protesters and vice versa.

The State's Response

Assad's forces continued to tighten their siege on rebellious towns, impose curfews, cut basic services and employed tanks, snipers and gunfire to crush protests. The regime also used a strategy of starving residents into submission. To incentivize cooperation, the military rewarded towns that surrendered by restoring water and electricity and facilitating the delivery of supplies.²⁷ The security forces maintained heavy police presence particularly in Damascus and Aleppo, and continued to fire live ammunition to disperse protesters. The state-led media continued to propagate the sectarian narrative arguing

Repression	
Killed	93
Concessions	
NIL	

²⁷ See for example: Rania Aboueid ‘Starving the Rebellion: Syria’s Brutal Tactics’ *Time*, May 13, 2011.

that the conflict was led by “terrorist groups,” who were determined to wipe out non-Sunnis and shatter Syria’s tolerant secular character.

Crisis 10: May 20-26

The “Friday of Freedom” drew large crowds into the main squares chanting anti-regime slogans and activists called for a general strike. Regime violence mobilized growing numbers of people to participate in demonstrations, which pushed Syria into a state of paralysis. Artillery attacks, siege operations and leaked videos of torture incited intense protests and spurred an international outcry. Various Syrian opposition groups announced a meeting in Turkey to discuss the post-Assad transition.

The State’s Response

The regime’s security measures of siege, starvation, firing at protests and detaining activists persisted. A number of soldiers defected from the military and claimed that the regime had executed those who refused to shoot at unarmed civilians.²⁸

Repression	
Killed	111

Concessions	
NIL	

²⁸ See for example: ‘We’ve Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces’ *Human Rights Watch*, June 2011, p. 18

Crisis 11: May 27-June 2

On May 28, footage of the 13-old Hamza al-Khatib’s horribly mutilated body surfaced in the international media. Al Khatib was detained by the intelligence services on April 29 during a protest. His body showed signs of torture, including burn marks, smashed kneecaps, gunshot wounds and castrated genitals.²⁹ Al- Khatib’s photos and video shocked the world and provoked greater protests across Syria chanting his name and burning Bashar’s pictures. Secretary Clinton condemned the murder and called on the Assad regime to “end the brutality.”³⁰ Human Rights Watch released a scathing report titled “We Have Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes against Humanity in Deraa” and urged the United Nations to hold Assad’s government accountable.

The State’s Response

Government forces continued to fire on protesters and shell towns into submission. On May 31, Assad announced that his government would spearhead a national dialogue and offered a pardon to political prisoners.³¹ The government denied torturing Hamza al-Khatib and claimed that his injuries were the result of decomposition or could have been faked by protesters. The military launched an operation to lay siege on Rastan and Talbiseh, two major towns north of Homs. It cut off basic services, blocked all roads and began attacking homes. It also engaged in reprisals against towns where opposition groups attacked its soldiers.

Repression	
Killed	101
Concessions	
Pardon political prisoners	
Initiate national dialogue	

²⁹ See for example: Hugh: Macleod and Annasofie Flamand ‘Tortured and Killed: Hamza al-Khateeb, age 13’ *Aljazeera News*, May 31, 2011

³⁰ See for example: Arwa Damon ‘In Death, a 13-year-old Becomes a Symbol of Syrian Opposition’ *CNN News*, May 31.

³¹ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 111

Crisis 12: June 3-9

By June 3, or the “Friday of Children”, al-Khatib’s brutal murder had shocked many fence sitters into participating in the uprising. The protests were intense and occurred throughout the country including a number of Damascus suburbs. People continued to put up resistance despite Assad’s violent repression. Military defections grew and many soldiers gave interviews to Arab and Western media flashing their military IDs, explaining the reasons for their defections and testifying that the regime had ordered them to fire indiscriminately at unarmed protesters and that those who refused to obey, were executed on the spot.³²

On June 9, a video circulated showing the body of another teen, Tamer al-Sharey, being returned to his parents by the security forces. The boy was detained by the intelligence in the same protest where they picked up al-Khatib by the end of April. He appeared to be a victim of torture and the footage sparked uproar and emboldened the opposition.

The State’s Response

Assad’s forces continued their unrelenting assault on protesters and shutting down of basic services. The military continued to deploy troops, tanks and attack helicopters to reinforce blockages and target restive towns. Bombardment forced thousands of residents to flee to Turkey and Jordan.

Repression	
Killed	189

Concessions	
NIL	

³² See for example: Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand ‘Syrian Army ‘Cracking’ amid Crackdown’ *Aljazeera News*, June 11, 2011; also ‘We’ve Never Seen Such Horror’ *Human Rights Watch*, June 2011

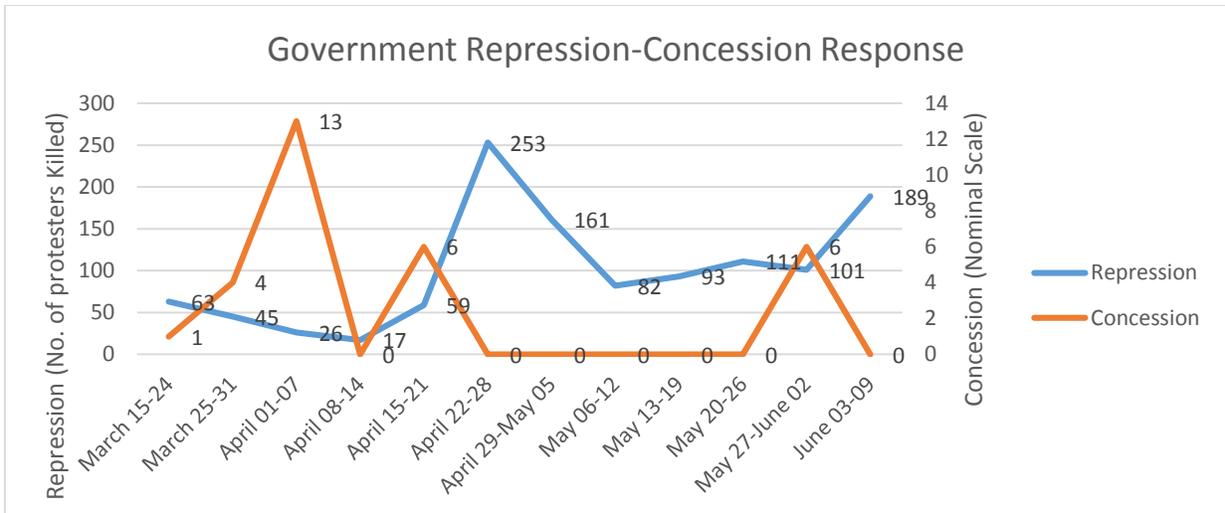


Figure 14: Government Repression-Concession Response

As figure-14 shows, one can divide Syria’s response to the crisis into two phases. The first phase constitutes the first month of the uprising, specifically the period between March 15 and April 14. In the first week of this period, Assad’s regime initially employed repression (killing 63 protesters/a week) while offering little concessions to the opposition (announcing the formation of a committee to look into reforms). This use of repression was consistent with the reflexes and reactions of a highly authoritarian regime determined to nip protests in the bud. In fact, the Syrian authorities were startled by the massive and widespread protests; they could not fathom that what they believed to be an apolitical and submissive population would muster the courage to challenge the regime.³³

³³ In interview with ICG, one Syrian businessman connected with the regime argued at the start of the uprising: “One problem is the smugness with which the elite look down on the people. They see their people as being completely under their control; they live with this illusion of total control.”
 ‘The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution’ ICG, July 6, 2011, p. 5, note 33

When ruthless violence failed to quiet the protesters, Assad decided to mix repression with concessions. Beginning with the second and third weeks, the regime decreased its repression to its minimum value during the crisis (killing 17 protesters/a week) and increased concessions to its maximum value by offering a series of unprecedented, but largely nominal, political reforms. Despite the regime's policy shift, domestic unrest intensified. Assad faced a dilemma; protests grew larger when the security forces harshly cracked down on the demonstrators but also scaling back government violence and offering reforms provided activists with a relative sense of safety, which emboldened more people to join the protests and raise the ceiling of their demands, intensifying the revolt.

The Syrian authorities failed to realize that once a popular mobilization gathers a "critical mass" in the streets and people break the barrier of fear, employing repression results in the opposite of its intended affect; i.e., it galvanizes rather than deters protests.³⁴ In addition, the regime's schizophrenic behavior most likely contributed to popular discontent and further fueled the unrest: by claiming to adopt a certain policy but implementing its opposite, Assad undermined his own credibility and alienated much of the populace who saw his ostensible accommodative measures as delaying tactics.

For example, Assad and his spokesperson announced several times that they had ordered security forces not to shoot at protesters, but the violent onslaught continued unabated. Perplexed by the continued protests, the regime began to adjust his policies. By the fourth week (April 8-14), having reduced repression to its minimum throughout the uprising, Assad stopped offering new

³⁴ See for example: Pamela E. Oliver, Gerald Marwell and Ruy Teixeira 'A Theory of the Critical Mass' *American Journal of Sociology*, pp. 522-556 (1985); Pamela E. Oliver and Gerald Marwell 'The Paradox of Group Size in Collective Action: A Theory of the Critical Mass II' *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 1-8 (February, 1988); Gerald Marwell, Pamela E. Oliver and Ralph Prahl 'Social Networks and Collective Actions: A Theory of the Critical Mass, III' *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, No. 3, pp. 504-534 (November, 1988)

concessions. At this point, it is likely Assad adopted a wait-and-see posture following his speech on March 31.

In the second phase of the crisis (April 15 until protests turned violent by mid-June), the regime's response was characterized by increasing repression and the absence of concessions. The regime ratcheted up brute force, escalated its indiscriminate attacks against civilians and set the stage for a bloody showdown from which there was no return. By this point, Assad had clearly adopted a zero-tolerance approach to compromise in his frantic bid to cling to power. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Rami Makhlouf, Assad's cousin, asserted that the "decision of the government now is that they decided to fight... We will sit here. We call it a fight until the end."³⁵

The regime did not reach its *prohibitive threshold* of repression for two main reasons. First, unlike in Egypt, the uprising in Syria never reached the revolutionary threshold whereby the protests overwhelmed or neutralized the state's coercive apparatus. Both, the Syrian military and the security services remained intact and continued to crack down on dissent. Second, the Syrian regime deliberately controlled its repressive responses. David Lesch argued that Assad "decided to dig in and do whatever it took to stay in power, but without incurring the wrath of the world by doing something drastic...the regime engaged in a Machiavellian calibration of bloodletting – enough to do the job, but not enough to lose what international support remained."³⁶ In fact, this calibration of violence had been reported by the regime's own forces. For example, in an interview by the *International Crisis Group*, Syrian officers often "repeat that they can finish all this [uprising] within two days, if only they were given a free hand. They complain that they are still

³⁵ Anthony Shadid 'Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to 'the End'' *The New York Times*, May 10, 2011

³⁶ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 164-165

operating with too many constraints. True, the orders have been to avoid large-scale operations that could provide the West with an excuse to intervene.”³⁷

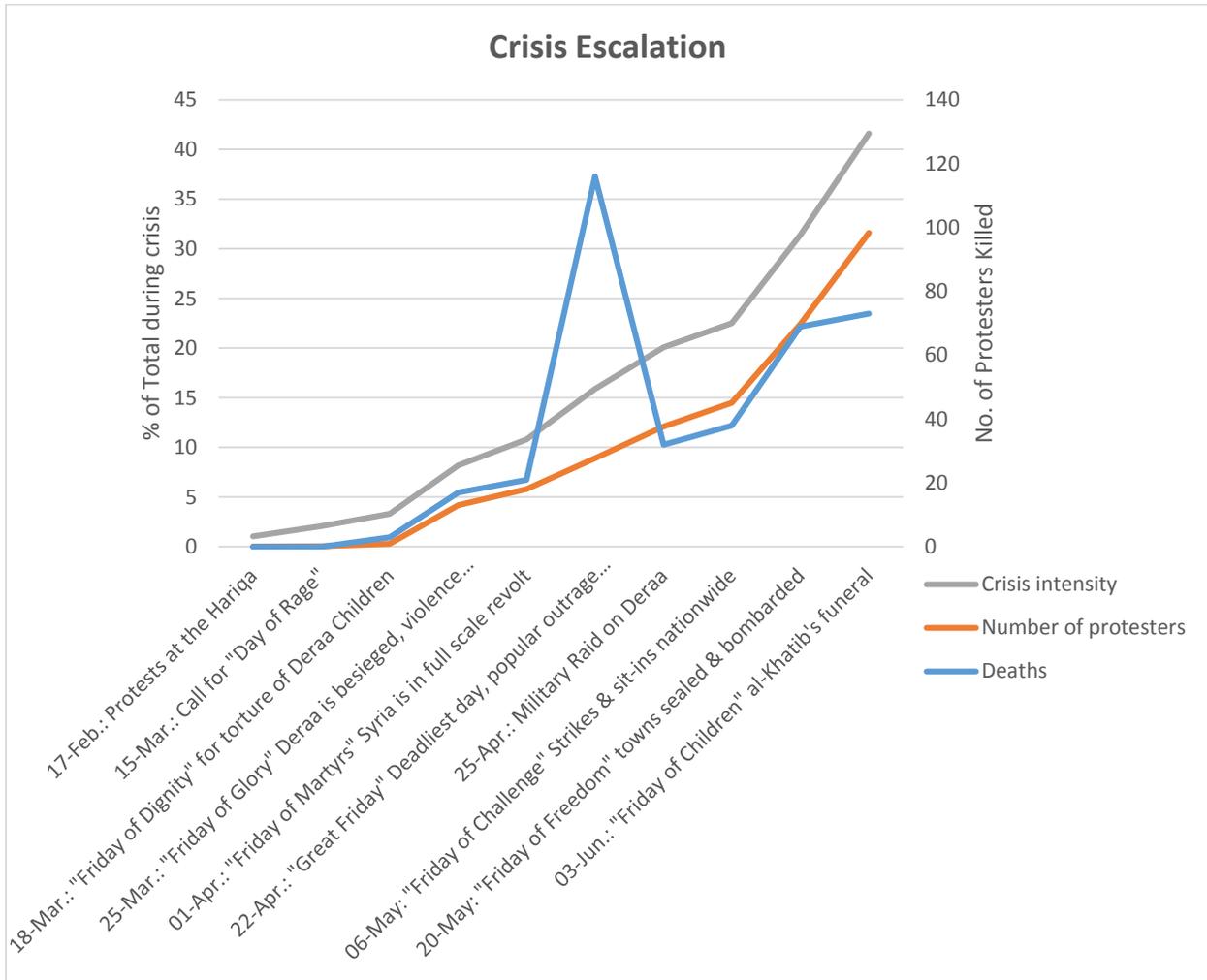


Figure 15: Crisis Escalation

The above crisis escalation graph helps identify the decisive events that shaped how the conflict unfolded. The graph shows March 15 as the initial critical turning point. On that day, and after having exhausted their search for means for redress, the families of the detained children along with hundreds of activists staged the first major demonstration in Deraa, after which the

³⁷ 'Syria's Mutating Conflict' *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report, N°128 – 1 August 2012, p. 5, note 25

protests rapidly rippled across the country. By mishandling an incident in a remote rural town, the regime provided the spark or a “cause” for the population to rally around and mobilize against the state. Almost all the current scholarship on Syria considers March 15 as the official start of the Syrian uprising.

The second defining moment was April 22, also known as the “Great Friday”. This was the deadliest day since the uprising broke out and the resulting popular outrage rattled the country to its core and triggered international condemnation. Syria was gripped by a nationwide revolt and the crisis decidedly passed the point of no return. As the graph illustrates, after April 22, there was a sharp rise in both the size of the protests and the intensity of the crisis. The third decisive moment was June 3, or the “Friday of Children.” On that day, an unprecedented number of people came to the streets to protest the regime’s brutal torture of Hamza al-Khatib who had become the new symbol of the anti-regime movement. By now, revolutionary sentiments had electrified the Syrian populace and the uprising ceased to be merely a “rural phenomenon” as massive protests spread to major cities, with the exception of the security-laden Aleppo, Damascus and the Alawite’s heartland, Latakia.

2. Motives Behind the Initial Crisis Response

Having established the pattern of the regime’s responses, it is important to explore whether or not low political costs to state repression has played a role in Assad’s policy choices. This chapter will only provide a brief look at the initial government’s response to crisis since the next chapter offers a more in-depth analysis of how the process of decision-making unfolded during the uprisings.

Multiple sources confirm that the Syrian government opted for a ‘security solution’ at the onset of the mass unrest. As protests swept through the region, by February 2011 Assad had formed a special committee to understand why the governments in Tunisia and Egypt crumpled under mass mobilization and to decide what the Assad government should do if the protests spread to Syria. The commission concluded “that the reason for the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had been the failure to crush protests at the moment of their inception.”³⁸ Therefore, the decision to use excessive force to nip the protests in the bud was made before the crisis began. Furthermore, Michel Kilo, a prominent Syrian opposition activist, argued that Assad’s regime premeditated the use of overwhelming force even before the protests started. He narrates:

Once the Libyan revolution began [on February 17], I was summoned to the internal security branch. Brigadier Tawfiq Younis asked me if I would participate in a protest if it ever took place in Syria. He then threatened, “if protests erupt and they are aimed at the regime, then either Syria or the regime will survive. Do not risk the fate of this country by challenging the political system because our response will be vicious beyond your imagination. We will destroy Syria stone by stone.”³⁹

Brigadier General Manaf Tlas, a former top Assad aide, stated: “Assad and the tight circle surrounding him were adamant to suppress the protests at all costs...I and others advised him against a brutal crackdown on civilians, but to no avail” and while “Bashar knew that protesters had some legitimate demands, he clung to the narrative of fighting terrorists because it fits with the regime’s overall narrative and strategy.”⁴⁰ Also, the Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt claimed that early in the uprising, he met Major General Mohammed Nassif, the Syrian Assistant

³⁸ Hassan Abbas ‘The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria’ *Arab Reform Brief*, October 2011

³⁹ Michel Kilo. Interview, in “Political Memory” program, part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. May 15, 2014. (Arabic)

⁴⁰ Manaf Tlas. Interview, in “The Arab Street” program. *Dubai Channel*. December 9, 2012 (Arabic)

Vice President, who told him, “it is either us or them”. Jumblatt later met President Bashar in Damascus on June, 2011 and, in a televised interview, he relayed parts of their conversation:

Jumblatt: —Am I safe to speak honestly with you?

Bashar: —Yes, go ahead.

Jumblatt: —What about Hamza Al Khatib, the young boy who was tortured to death?

Bashar: —We did not torture him.

Jumblatt: —But your government killed him.

Bashar: —Yes, because Syria does not have effective and professional police forces.

Jumblatt: —Why didn’t you punish the perpetrator, Atef Najeeb (who arrested and tortured the Deraa Kids)?

Bashar: —I cannot punish him unless someone brings a case against him in court.

(Jumblatt comments: —I thought to myself that this is as if Syria were like Switzerland in regards to respecting the rule of law!)

Bashar (changing the subject): — A group of Syrian artists came to see me and said they were worried about me because someone other than myself seems to be making policy decisions in Syria. I reassured them that I still rule Syria, and that people have to fear me.

Jumblatt: —Mr. President, people have to love you, not fear you...

(Jumblatt comments: —This dialogue soon finished and with it, I discovered the two sides of Bashar’s personality, the gentle and the fearsome).⁴¹

Not only did the regime have the intent to repress ruthlessly, but its security forces also acted with total self-confidence given their institutionalized impunity. In its report “We Have Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces”, Human Rights Watch concluded that

[T]he nature and scale of abuses committed by the Syrian security forces, the similarities in the apparent unlawful killings and other crimes, and evidence of

⁴¹ Walid Jumblatt. Interview, in “I am from There” Program, *Orient TV*, Beirut, Lebanon. November 23, 2014 (Arabic)

direct orders given to security forces to “shoot to kill” protesters, strongly suggest these abuses qualify as crimes against humanity.⁴²

The killings, torture and other inhumane acts by the Syrian regime constitute crimes against humanity since they were implemented as a “state policy” and committed as part of a “widespread or systematic” attack directed against the civilian population.⁴³ The report also described that many of the victims “sustained head, neck and chest wounds, suggesting that they were deliberately targeted.”⁴⁴ Most importantly, it obtained numerous witness accounts of soldiers who said they had received “clear orders to shoot, with no conditions or prerequisites; literally – to load and shoot” and that “they would have been killed by their commanders if they refused to shoot.”⁴⁵ Several defected soldiers also corroborated these claims in televised interviews. In his book, *The Syrian Rebellion*, Ajami states,

The Military units were given orders to “kill or kill” – kill the protesters or kill those soldiers who refuse to obey orders...The soldiers were deployed up front, the mukhabarat operatives behind them. Snipers on rooftops would fire at soldiers pointed out to them by the officers and the mukhabarat. Soldiers who wanted out of the killing and stopped firing could be summarily executed on the spot. The military uniform offered no protection. The regime and its intelligence agencies had prepared for this moment.⁴⁶

Since the uprising erupted, Assad’s forces used large scale lethal force and committed atrocities with complete impunity. The Syrian regime has consistently denied responsibility for the violence and has only paid lip service to investigating the killings. In fact, the military, the security

⁴² ‘We’ve Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces’ *Human Rights Watch*, June 2011, p. 15

⁴³ *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, art. 7

⁴⁴ ‘We’ve Never Seen Such Horror’ *Human Rights Watch*, June 2011, p. 17

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 18

⁴⁶ Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 145-146

services and the *shabiha* continued to escalate their use of brutality, which culminated in the commission of a series of massacres beginning in 2012 and the use of chemical weapons in 2013.

Leenders argued that when the uprising erupted, the Syrian regime

[h]as abandoned the judiciary in its attempt to quell protests...courts generally played no role whatsoever as security forces, combat troops, and thugs have been deployed to violently suppress the demonstrations...the regime's adversaries have been branded foreign agents and conspirators deserving no mercy and indeed no trial.⁴⁷

In conclusion, the *pattern* of use of overwhelming force at the onset of the uprising coupled with the security forces' *intent* to quell the protests violently and, most crucially the *lack of adequate accountability since the uprisings began*, suggest that the regime's perception of its state repression having low political costs most likely influenced its crisis decision calculus, together with other potentially determining factors.

3. Findings and Conclusion

This chapter explored the argument and sought to find empirical evidence that when a regime perceives it enjoys *lower costs for employing state repression, they are more likely to respond with violent repression at the onset of domestic unrest*. The *pattern* of the Assad's regime repression-concession responses, the *motive* behind its violence against protesters coupled with the *lack of adequate accountability a posteriori* all suggest that the leaders' perception of the low political costs of state repression most likely influenced their crisis policy choices.

⁴⁷ Reinoud Leenders 'Prosecuting Political Dissent' in *Middle East Authoritarianism: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, in Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, eds., pp. 169-199 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013): p. 199

The previous chapter concluded that the Assad regime is highly authoritarian. The consolidation of the regime's power over state institutions, resources and national narrative provided it with the institutional infrastructure to repress with impunity. When leaders confront very few institutional constraints in their policymaking and believe that they will not be held accountable for their actions, they internalize the low political costs to using repression against their populace. The Syrian authorities seemed to believe that there was *high probability of their being able to suppress the uprisings through brutal crackdowns and to survive any potential domestic reprisal*; that is to say, that they could afford the resultant political costs to do so. This finding comes with the following caveats.

As in the Egyptian case study, an element of a feedback loop was at work in the Syrian case; i.e., the Assad regime's policy choices in each crisis were informed by what happened in the preceding interaction with protesters. This could reduce the effect of the hypothesized variable on the decision calculus as the leadership reevaluates and adapts its responses according to developments on the ground. For example, while the Egyptian regime did not offer any concession whatsoever up until its police forces collapsed, the Syrian regime began with nominal concessions and increased them to their maximum value despite the fact that its forces remained loyal and intact. These actions are partly due to the fact that Assad, having witnessed Ben Ali and Mubarak banished from power a few weeks before, was by then fully aware of the destabilizing influence of the regional wave of protests.

The assumption that authoritarian regimes continue to repress until repression reaches a certain 'prohibitive threshold' could not be substantiated in this Syrian case study. During the crisis (the first three months of the uprising), Assad's forces remained loyal and wholly intact and continued to repress undeterred. Also, the Syrian regime seemed to have calibrated its repressive

measures so as not to cross a certain threshold that would provoke foreign intervention. In fact, and as will be discussed in greater details in the next chapters, Assad continued this behavior by constantly testing the red lines, which culminated in his brazen chemical attack on August 2013.

While the political costs of state repression played a role in Assad's decision calculus, it is important to mention other plausible contributing factors. First, the regime perhaps calculated that it would likely suppress the uprising given the fear factor of ordinary citizens. The regime perhaps thought that protests were not likely to spread due to Syria's far weaker and more fragmented civil society compared to those of Egypt and Tunis and, most importantly, that the military and security forces would not likely abandon the regime and, thus persist in its willingness to show no mercy to crush dissent.

Second, the longstanding sectarian bitterness and the regime's minority complex had likely predisposed the Alawite-dominated government to employ preemptive or anticipatory violence against sectarian rivals. By engaging in ruthless repression, the regime also wanted to revive the collective memory of the Hama massacres, suggesting that it would be willing to go to similar magnitudes to deter further protests. Ambassador Fredric C. Hof, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and former advisor on Syria to the US State Department, argues that the horrific Hama episode

not only reflected the potential for brutal, openly sectarian violence between a largely Alawite regime and its Sunni majority population—a potential we are seeing borne out in full today—it left in its wake a legacy of enduring sectarian bitterness on both sides: Alawites had been deliberately targeted by Sunni Islamists, and Sunnis had been massacred by the thousands at the hands of predominantly Alawite units... [When] the Assad regime elected to assault peaceful protesters with armed force it was, by definition, pitting mostly Alawites against mostly Sunnis. Sunnis accounted for most of the protesters. Alawites accounted for most

of the troops, intelligence operatives, and police willing to do the regime's bidding.⁴⁸

Third, the Assad regime concluded that the protests in Tunisia and Egypt had succeeded in deposing the leadership since these regimes conceded easily, appeared weak and failed to use overwhelming force to quash the unrest at the outset.⁴⁹ Essentially, the fear of appearing weak prompted Assad to do the opposite of what happened in other Arab Spring-hit states. Zachary Shore, in *Blunder*, describes this condition as exposure anxiety, which “drives its victims to commit excessive force in order to appear extra tough.”⁵⁰ However, the regime’s policy of employing extremely harsh measures to avoid being perceived by protesters as weak and to offer concessions from a position of strength have all backfired. Assad failed to realize that once a popular mobilization gains a “critical mass,” repression becomes counterproductive. Also, by offering concessions while continuing his bellicose rhetoric and crackdown unabated, the Syrian people lost both hope and trust that Assad would affect genuine democratic reforms. Most crucially, by detaining, torturing and subjecting thousands of activists to a degrading treatment in makeshift facilities, the regime emboldened protesters to fight to the last breath as their slogan proclaimed “freedom or death.” In fact, Syrian activists on televised interviews would often quote the 18th Century French revolutionary leader, Louis de Saint-Just, that “those who make revolution half way only dig their own graves.”

⁴⁸ Fredric C. Hof ‘Sectarian Violence in Syria’s Civil War: Causes, Consequences and Recommendations for Mitigation’ *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Center for the Prevention of Genocide*, 2013, p.12-15

⁴⁹ See for example: David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 74

⁵⁰ Zachary Shore, *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008): p. 15

Fourth, and as will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, Assad marginalized, indeed, excluded those top regime officials who disagreed with his iron-fisted response from the decision making process. These officials included the vice president, prime ministers and several military commanders, some of whom defected from the regime as the uprising escalated into a full-scale civil war. To achieve consensus while confronting serious national security threats, Assad restricted crisis policy decisions to the most loyal and conformist advisors who saw the uprising through the eyes of a sectarian prism and, hence, the regime drifted into a dysfunctional decision making process of groupthink. By failing to foster an environment where officials could safely debate and critically evaluate the pros and cons of the government's excessive and indiscriminate force, the Syrian regime fell headlong into reductionist and simplistic solutions of zero-sum sectarian calculus and could not operate beyond the mindset of a minority regime fighting tooth and nail for its survival.

Next, following standard operating procedures in managing dissent may have influenced how the government reacted to the domestic unrest. Hokayem argues that having been “[e]quipped with a rulebook that prioritized repression, inspired by past experiences of security responses and informed by the regime’s self-image, it is unlikely that Assad would have taken another route.”⁵¹ In describing the regime’s crisis behavior, David Lesch also states:

This was just how the Syrian regime under the Assads reacts to such things. When a domestic threat appears, there is a push-button response of quick and ruthless repression. Survival instincts. No one really questions it. The *mukhabarat* and the elite units of the military swing into action. It was an institutional, convulsive response to perceived threats...It was business as usual in a *mukhabarat* state.⁵²

⁵¹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 41

⁵² David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 105

Sixth, civil-military relations, and more specifically the extent to which the coercive institutions would remain loyal to the regime, have likely played a significant role in Assad's policy decisions. Unlike in Egypt, most military commanders, elite units, intelligence and security officers in Syria predominantly hail from the Alawite sect and, hence, maintain an organic link with the Assad regime. The institutional survival of these forces is inextricably connected to the political survival of the Alawite regime. Alawite generals know well that they most likely have no future in a post-Assad transition, and may in fact face prosecution, if not outright violent purges, for their crimes during the reigns of both Assads. This knowledge prompted the Syrian forces to obey orders and stand by the regime at all costs despite the catastrophic consequences of such actions to the state. In fact, by placing the survival of Assad as president on top of the national survival of the state, the Alawite-dominated forces jeopardized Syria's territorial integrity, national sovereignty and possibly its political survival in pursuit of their parochial goal.

The above-mentioned plausible factors are neither mutually exclusive nor constitute an exhaustive list of what could have incentivized the Syrian regime and its security forces to commit to one policy over another. There are known and perhaps unknown variables that shaped Assad's strategic calculus in confronting regime-toppling protests. What clearly stood from the current mainstream scholarship on the Syrian 2011 crisis is that any suggestion that Bashar was hopelessly 'out of touch' of what's happening on the ground or continuously 'misinformed by his aides' has no empirical basis and contradicts all the views of those who were part of or had close access to the Syrian leadership.

The crisis in Deraa that kindled the Syrian uprising could have been averted and the escalation to civil war was not inevitable. Contrast how the regime responded to the unprecedented protest in central Damascus on February 17 when the interior minister punished the offender and

calmed things down to the government's later response to the crisis in Deraa. The demands of the people in Deraa boiled down to firing the local governor, punishing Atef Najib (the political security chief who arrested and tortured the children) and apologizing to the families of the victims.⁵³ Had the government promptly sacked and punished the perpetrators and apologized to local leaders for the insults, many Syrians believe that the protests would come to an end. However, the Assad regime focused primarily on suppressing the insurrection by force and ignored other non-violent means of de-escalation. When the uprising spread nationwide and more people sympathized with the plight of Deraa, many Syrians adopted these demands as their own and raised them to *firing* the entire regime, *punishing* all the security institutions and *apologizing* to all Syrians.

Like other dictators, Assad squandered opportunities that could have stanching the unrest and played catch up with protesters by offering too little too late. Assad ultimately fired the governor of Deraa on April 6, perhaps as an indirect admission of the governor's responsibility for the deaths in his town, but such measure was already too late to calm the mobilized populace. By then the crisis had escalated, Syrians were in a revolutionary mode, the uprising had entered a self-perpetuating cycle (where funerals of fallen protesters became rallying points for more anti-government demonstrations) and too much blood had been spilled to return to the status quo ante. Popular demands had shifted from a call for reforms to demanding regime change.

Aware of their institutionalized impunity, Assad's forces engaged the protesters in a stunning hubris that galvanized the domestic insurrection. When soldiers desecrated mosques in Deraa and offended the Islamic faith, the regime demonstrated a flagrant disregard for the piety of

⁵³ Assad ordered the referral of Atef Najib and Faisal Kalthoum (former Deraa governor) to justice. However, according to public sources, both were punished with a ban from travel. Bishara, *a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 104, note 31

Muslims, provoked sectarian strife, alienated many of the fence sitters and exacerbated identity politics. For many Syrians, these contemptuous practices had made the Assad regime a permanent enemy. Mosques had traditionally been off limits, even under the brutal French colonialism. Ajami argued that by defiling places of worship and by involving the medical staff in hospitals in the torture of injured protesters “the regime had long obliterated the “red lines” that rulers observe if the most rudimentary form of social contract is to be maintained.”⁵⁴

When the public expected immediate, genuine and far-reaching reforms, Assad offered instead vague, belated, half-hearted and top-down measures, most of which were belied by practices on the ground, such as lifting of the emergency law, ordering the security forces not to shoot at demonstrators and authorizing people to organize peaceful protests. He lost credibility among the populace early on the crisis. In every interview given to Western media outlets, he denied killing civilians. In an interview with Barbara Walters, Assad insisted, “We don’t kill our people, nobody kill. No government in the world kill its people, unless it’s led by crazy person.”⁵⁵ He burnt vital bridges with his allies in the region and with the Syrian opposition who were initially willing to accept him at the helm if he would just change the course of his policy of uncompromising crackdown. An ICG report on July 2011 argued that Assad’s “mix of uninhibited brutality, sectarian manipulation, crude propaganda and grudging concessions...convinced many [Syrians] that no fundamental change would occur as long as the regime survived.”⁵⁶

The Syrian regime had invested heavily in building its massive coercive infrastructure and had delegated the mukhabarat and security forces to deal with people’s daily problems arising from socioeconomic grievances, entrenched corruption, police repression...etc. Assad had a big

⁵⁴ Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 151

⁵⁵ ‘Defiant Assad Denies Ordering Bloody Syrian Crackdown’ *ABC news*, December 7, 2011

⁵⁶ ‘The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide’ *ICG*, Report N°109 – 13 July 2011, p. 1

hammer and saw all problems as nails. When violence failed to suppress the protests, the regime believed that it needed to use even more, rather than less, violence to achieve their goals. The regime failed to modify its policies even though repression clearly provoked more protesters and made matters worse. Within a month of the uprising, the regime's security solution turned into a full scale military operation as troops, state-funded militias, tanks and attack helicopters besieged towns, bombarded buildings, looted homes and burned shops. This intensified brutality led many residents to take up arms to protect themselves, which soon transformed the uprising into a bloody civil war.

Coercion is the backbone of authoritarian regimes. It is no wonder why dictatorships go to great lengths to protect their security forces from prosecution of repression. Without these institutional guarantees, coercive institutions would refuse to repress dissent and save regimes from protests, uprisings and revolutions. However, these same institutional guarantees foster a culture of impunity within security personnel who may engage in outrageous acts of hubris, which may not be necessarily sanctioned by the state leadership. Like any dictator, Assad's reliance on his security forces deepened during the regime-threatening protests since they were his only defense against his rebellious population. An ICG report argues that "by giving a relatively free hand to security forces, the regime ha[d] become increasingly dependent on and indebted to its more hardline elements. This has made it far less likely that it ultimately will carry out what it has proposed [of implementing reforms]; even assuming it truly wishes to."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ 'The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide' *ICG*, Report N°109 – 13 July 2011, p. *i*

Chapter 12

Shifts in the ‘Authoritative Decision Unit’ during Crisis

This chapter examines the ‘authoritative decision unit’ during the Syrian uprising. The research hypothesis posits that *the authoritative decision unit shifts during the crisis*. The underlying assumption is that crises of domestic unrest in authoritarian regimes present an opportune moment for various domestic actors (the dictator, the military, the ruling political party, etc.) to tilt the balance of power in their favor in their pursuit to maximize their political survival and maintain their interests in a setting marred by violence and uncertainty. Unlike in Egypt’s case study, there are no sources available describing the Syrian regime’s decision making process on a day-to-day basis. However, it is possible to determine with sufficient certainty what Syria’s authoritative decision units were and whether or not they shifted throughout the uprising and subsequent civil war. This task can be done by exploring information gleaned from all available sources. These sources include the perspectives of former or defected high ranking regime officials, leaked Assad crisis cell’s secret documents, Syrian scholars and analysts familiar with the regime’s decision making structure, as well as diplomats who met regularly with the Syrian leadership. This chapter answers the following questions: Who were the actors in Syria’s key decision units? Did these decision units shift during the crisis? And, what were the implications for the crisis outcomes?

1. Key Decision Actors in Syria

According to multiple sources, the following regime officials were the key decision makers during the Syrian uprising and civil war:

The Authoritative Decision Unit: The Regime's Inner Circle

- President Bashar al-Assad
- Maher al-Assad: Bashar's brother, Commander of the Republican Guard
- Mohammed Makhoul: Bashar's maternal uncle, a formidable business tycoon
- Hafez Mohammed Makhoul: Bashar's maternal cousin, head of the Damascus branch of the General Security Directorate
- Rami Mohammed Makhoul: Bashar's maternal cousin, Syria's wealthiest businessman
- Asef Shawkat: Bashar's brother-in-law, Deputy Minister of Defense; he was killed in the bomb attack that targeted the crisis cell on July 18, 2012
- Major General Zu al-Hima Chalick: Bashar's first cousin and the head of Presidential Security
- Major General Zuhair Hamad: Deputy of General Security Directorate
- Major General Hisham Ikhtiyar: Bashar's National Security Advisor; he was killed in the bomb attack on July 18, 2012

The Operational Decision Unit: The Regime's Outer circle, in no particular order

- Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek: former Lt. General and deputy vice president for security affairs
- Hasan Turkmani: former Defense Minister (2004-2009), assistant vice president and chief of crisis operations during the uprising; he was killed in the bomb attack on July 18, 2012
- Dawoud Rajha: Defense Minister; died in the bomb attack on July 18, 2012

- Lieutenant General Ali Mamluk: former head of the General Security Agency; replaced Hisham Ikhtiyar in 2012
- Lieutenant General Rustum Ghazaleh: Chief of Political Security Directorate
- Major General Jamil Hassan: head of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate
- Major General Abdel Fatah Qudsiyeh: deputy director of the National Security Bureau
- Major General Rafiq Shahadah: head of the Military Intelligence Directorate
- Major General Mohammed Dib Zaitoun: head of General Security Directorate

2. Decision Units during the Crisis

In the first two weeks of the uprising, and before Assad addressed the nation in his first speech on March 30, two contrasting views dominated in Syria and the regional Arab media discourse. The first was that Assad was in control of the regime; that he gave direct orders to shoot protesters and that he was well aware of the escalating conflict and the rise of fallen pro-democracy activists. The second, that Assad was weak, unable to control the security forces, out of touch with the events on the ground, cocooned in his palace and constantly misinformed by sycophantic aides.¹ Either way, protesters believed that Assad must go. However, and as many Syrians are quick to point out, Bashar's first belligerent speech and conspiratorial rhetoric, in which he precluded any compromise with protesters and showed no hint of willingness for reforms of his own volition, left no doubt in the minds of Syrians that the president dug in for a long and bloody fight to the end.

¹ Bishara, *Syria: A Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 115

There is more than enough evidence to suggest that Bashar al-Assad remained all along at the apex of the regime’s decision making structure; i.e., that there was no shift in the authoritative decision unit throughout the Syrian crisis. In fact, one reason why the Syrian regime persevered despite political defections, military desertions and numerous battlefield setbacks was that the regime’s core decision making structure remained unchanged. Al-Assad and his inner circle dominated policymaking at the strategic level. As can be seen from figure-15, relatives and fellow Alawites dominated his inner circle. The outer circle that was comprised of predominantly Alawite military and security commanders remained preoccupied with the operational level of crisis management and had marginal influence on policymaking. All defections, which included dozens of military commanders, a prime minister and two ambassadors whom the regime easily replaced, occurred outside the regime’s inner and outer circles.

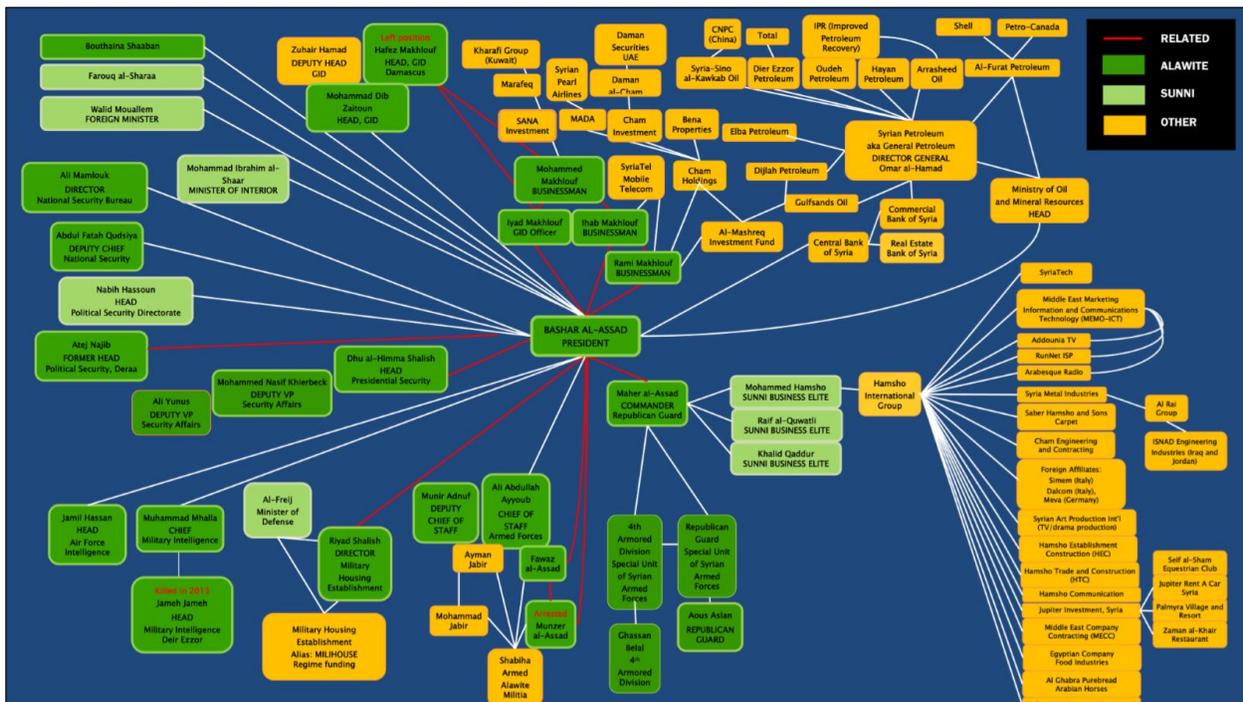


Figure 15: The Assad Regime’s Top officials, “All the Tyrants Men”, *The Washington Institute*, August 23, 2013

As will be discussed below, the authoritative decision unit did not shift throughout the crisis since Bashar and his clique maintained their dominance in policymaking. However, the *configuration* of the decision unit (predominant leader – single group – coalition of autonomous actors) changed as more regime figures (military commanders) and international actors (Iran, Iraq, Russia and Hezbollah) gradually exerted greater influence on policy choices. One consequence of the non-shift in the decision unit is the ongoing protracted and ruinous stalemate of the Syrian conflict. This outcome results because the domestic balance of power within the Syrian regime remained largely unchanged, parties to the conflict persisted in a war of attrition. Had the regime's balance of power altered through palace or military coup, different developments would have most likely ensued.

A number of regime insiders have indicated that Bashar and his inner circle had remained at the center of crisis policy decisions since the start of the uprising. For example, Nawaf al-Fares, former Ambassador and senior intelligence officer said that “while Bashar continued to be the ultimate decision maker...those around him influenced his policy decisions, particularly his uncle Mohamed Makhoulf...Then came other relatives, his foreign backers, i.e. the Iranian and Russian officials, and Hezbollah.”² Riad Hijab, former prime minister (defected August 2012) pointed out that “Bashar always had the final word on policy matters... but his cousins had the greatest influence on his decisions, much more so than his brother Maher.”³ Bassam Imadi, former Syrian Ambassador to Sweden, indicated that “Assad is in full control because he has the final word...It has been evident from people who met the president that he himself is ordering the security forces to end this uprising by all means.”⁴ In addition, Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN peace envoy to Syria

² Nawaf Fares. Interview, in ‘Without Borders’ Program, *Al Jazeera Channel*, Doha, Qatar. August 8, 2012 (Arabic)

³ Riad Hijab. Interview, in ‘Special Meeting’ program. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. September 27, 2012 (Arabic)

⁴ Cajsa Wikstrom ‘Assad’s grip on Power’ *Al Jazeera News*, January 30, 2012.

(2012 – 2014), said the following in a televised interview: “Through my interactions with Assad, I found him fully aware of both the situation and how his government was responding to the uprising... He seemed confident that he would defeat his foes and overcome this crisis.”⁵

Assad’s tight control of the decision making process is manifested in his centralized crisis management. In an exclusive interview with Al Arabiya channel, Abdel Majid Barakat revealed covert documents from Assad’s government security plans. Mr. Barakat worked in the secretariat of the Syrian crisis cell before he defected. He argued that the documents

show that Assad is in charge and not a victim or unaware of any procedures taken by his military men. Assad...is the head of the Crisis Cell, followed by his brother Maher, and nine of the regime’s top security generals. The president is constantly informed of both the situation on the ground and the strategies in place to contain it, through a clear timeline of meetings and reports. More than that, the final commands and decisions are in his hands. Because of the fragile situation in Syria, Assad could not freely move and attend the meetings at the cell unit...the generals visited him twice or three times a week, when the cell members met at the Presidential Palace.⁶

These leaked documents show that Bashar’s National Security advisor, Hisham Ikhtiyar, sent weekly executive orders to the military, security agencies, party members and the crisis cell. The reports provided the regime’s security plan for confronting the protests, which peaked on Fridays. They also went into great tactical details of setting up checkpoints on specific roads, isolating particular areas, allocating explicit funds for agencies and preventing protesters from gathering in certain public squares.⁷

⁵ Lakhdar Brahimi. Interview, in ‘Political Memory’ program, part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. March 20, 2015 (Arabic)

⁶ ‘Assad’s ‘Crisis Cell’ Reveals Syrian Regime in Crisis’, *Al Arabiya News*, April 20, 2012

⁷ ‘Al Arabiya shows Syrian crisis cell’s leaked documents’ *Al Arabiya News* (Arabic), April 17, 2012

Barakat also revealed that all security agencies sent daily situation reports (SITREP) by 7 pm to the crisis cell's headquarters. The secretariat summarized the incoming reports and presented them to the president by noon the next day along with the crisis cell's recommendations for actions. Al-Assad would review these reports, approve or reject recommendations, add his own comments and send back a signed copy to the cell's headquarters. The president's feedback sets the agenda for the cell's daily meeting.⁸ In general, the disclosed documents indicate a regime obsessed with tight control and centralization of policymaking down to the tactical levels.

There are five major institutional factors that helped maintain Assad's decision unit at the helm: a highly personalist authoritarian regime, a centralized decision making during crisis, primordial sectarian identity, the formation of a crisis cell and the loyalty of the military and security institutions.

2.1 Highly Personalist Authoritarian Regime

As previously discussed in chapter 10, Bashar inherited and nurtured a highly authoritarian regime, which concentrated vast powers in the hands of the president. During his tenure, Assad had eliminated potential rivals (the 'old guard') further marginalized the Baath ruling Party, appointed his own loyalists in all state institutions and consolidated his grip over power. Throughout the foreign policy challenges he confronted, Assad reinforced the personalized, centralist and hierarchical rule and decision making structures on which he sits at the top as the ultimate decision maker.

⁸ Ibid

Syria's deep-rooted authoritarian culture does not encourage bureaucrats and civil servants to take initiatives and make decisions. Instead, officials prefer to refer matters up the chain of command.⁹ Due to this over-centralization within decision making, the Syrian bureaucracy became notorious for its byzantine, cumbersome and inefficient routines. Trivial matters such the decision to broadcast a television program or publish a newspaper article "that might be seen as critical may be referred to the minister of information, or even the president."¹⁰ To illustrate how insignificant issues are often passed to higher authorities for decisions, the International Crisis Group describes an incident as recounted by a Syrian security officer just prior to the eruption of the uprising:

In a primary school in Damascus, some child wrote "toz" [a slang word used to express disdain and indifference] on Bashar's portrait [hanging in the class- room]. The teacher called the director, who called the local party chief, who called the head of the Damascus branch, who called National Security, who called us. Instead of telling the teacher to replace the portrait and quietly try to figure out who did it, our guys went in, put all the kids in a row and threatened them. One had a heart condition and began sweating and twitching. So they accused him and he had a stroke. I'm not sure the child survived.¹¹

In this personalized regime, even cabinet ministers lack much of the powers their counterparts enjoy in other countries. Asaad Mustafa who served as a Member of Parliament, Minister of Agriculture and Governor of Hama stated that "in Syria, a minister's responsibilities are confined to administrative and technical issues whereas, policy decisions remain in the hands of the president and his security services."¹² Riad Hijab also stated, "unlike in other countries, prime ministers in Syria are not involved in security and military issues. These are left to the head

⁹ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernization and the Limits of Change*, p. 24

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ 'Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution' International Crisis Group, Report N°108 – 6 July 2011, p. 9

¹² Asaad Mustafa. Interview, in 'Political Memory' program, part 5. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. October 5, 2013 (Arabic)

of state and his close security advisors.”¹³ Bente Scheller, a frequent commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, argued, “the system under Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad was not designed to encourage political initiative, and [that] this has in turn prevented the kind of adaptation that might have led to a political solution.”¹⁴ Therefore, when the uprising broke out, Assad had the advantage of being the top of the formal hierarchical decision-making structure vested by the constitution and worked within an environment that had an entrenched practices and socio-political culture that gave him the final word on all critical issues.

In July 18, 2012, a bomb attack targeted the regime’s crisis cell and killed four of Assad’s top officials: the Deputy Vice President, the Defense Minister, the Deputy Defense Minister and Assad’s National Security Advisor. At the time, the loss of such high level government officials triggered speculations of an impending regime collapse. However, because most officials below the president are functionaries, the assassination did not shake the regime, which proceeded immediately to fill the vacant positions. Grace Abu Hamad and Andrew Tabler, Syria policy analysts at the Washington Institute, argued that “the Assad regime is designed to foster trusted, experienced elites who can be moved up in the power structure in easy, interchangeable fashion.”¹⁵ This was also true for political defections and military desertions. In fact, Assad stated in a televised interview that the government at times facilitated these defections. He described them as forms of “self-cleansing” whereby the regime rids itself of its disloyal elements.¹⁶

¹³ Riad Hijab. Interview, in ‘In-depth’ program, *Al Jazeera Channel*, Doha, Qatar. October 23, 2012 (Arabic)

¹⁴ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game*, p. 46

¹⁵ Grace Abuhamad and Andrew J. Tabler, ‘All the Tyrant’s men: Chipping Away at the Assad Regime’s Core’ *The Washington Institute*, August 23, 2013

¹⁶ Mariam Karouny and Erika Solomon ‘Assad says Syria was aware of, allowed defections’ *Reuters*, August 29, 2012

2.2 Centralized Decision Making during Crisis

As the literature on crisis management posits, the decision making power becomes centralized in the executive during times of crisis.¹⁷ At the onset of the uprising, Bashar monopolized policy making, marginalized state institutions and depended on his small circle of relatives and top security commanders for policy deliberation.¹⁸ The Syrian president also sidelined government officials who disagreed with his military solutions.¹⁹ These officials included vice president Farouq al-Sharaa who advocated for a political compromise but was powerless to affect a policy change within the regime.²⁰ Assad also refused to meet al-Sharaa for a whole year from the outbreak of the crisis and in 2012, he forced him to assert his undisputed loyalty to the president at a cabinet meeting.²¹ In addition, Lakhdar Brahimi and numerous other diplomats have indicated that their requests to meet with al-Sharaa had been consistently denied by the Syrian regime.²²

Equally important, when Assad committed his forces to defeating the uprising, coercive institutions assumed a greater role in the crisis policy formulation. As can be seen from both the authoritative and the operational decision units, Assad is surrounded predominantly by military and security advisors. Therefore, the national security decision making is disproportionally framed and addressed in military terms and the cold calculation of hard power.²³ Wieland argued,

¹⁷ See for example: Paul 't Hart, Uriel Rosenthal and Alexander Kouzmin 'Crisis Decision Making: The Centralization Thesis Revisited' *Administration and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 12-45 (May, 1993): p. 14

¹⁸ Riad Hijab. Interview, in 'Special Meeting' program. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. September 27, 2012 (Arabic)

¹⁹ Bishara, *A Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 253

²⁰ 'Al-Sharaa comes out of his silence: the military solution is an illusion...the solution is in a historic compromise' *Al Akhbar*, Issue 1884, December 17, 2012 (Arabic)

²¹ Bishara, *A Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 252

²² See for example: Lakhdar Brahimi. Interview, in 'Political Memory' program, part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. March 20, 2015 (Arabic)

²³ 'Syria's Assad deluded by his inner circle, UN envoy Brahimi says' *Reuters*, February 28, 2013.

The “security solution” of 2011 shifted the power toward those organs who upheld the president’s post. Neither diplomacy nor political aptness played a role in the suppression. Thus it was the military elite units and the mukhabarat that represented the sources of Assad’s stamina – in particular the Fourth Brigade under Maher al-Assad and Asef Shawkat [Bashar’s brother-in-law].²⁴

Another consequence of high level military-security influence in crisis policy making manifests in the lack of systematic elucidation of strategic objectives, national interests, policy instruments and alternative options. As chapter 15 will explain in detail, Assad’s regime failed to formulate a cohesive strategy that would link obtainable goals with the appropriate means to achieve them and to continually assess the ends-means match. By limiting the authoritative decision unit to quite a small group of like-minded individuals and shunning dissenting views, the president’s inner circle became particularly vulnerable to the pathologies of groupthink and idiosyncratic tendencies. Riad Hijab states:

After the July 2012 bombing of the crisis management cell, I met vice-president Farouq al-Sharaa and the assistant secretary to the Syrian Regional command of the Baath Party, Mohammed Saeed Bekheitan. We agreed that the military solution was not going anywhere and that the time had come for a political solution to save Syria. President Bashar rejected our recommendations to engage with the opposition... Bashar regarded anyone who challenged his iron-fisted policy as either treacherous or coward.²⁵

While Assad remained the ultimate decision maker, this did not necessarily mean that he had personally ordered all the crimes committed by his security forces. David Lesch argued that Bashar was “certainly in control... [but he had] dangerously accorded the mukhabarat too much leeway and autonomy in carrying out their prescriptive actions against dissent.”²⁶ During periods

²⁴ Carsten Wieland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 77

²⁵ Riad Hijab. Interview, in ‘Special Meeting’ program. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. September 27, 2012 (Arabic)

²⁶ Cajsa Wikstrom ‘Assad’s grip on Power’ *Al Jazeera News*, January 30, 2012.

of state-sponsored terror, dictators often maintain a level of plausible deniability that could help insulate them from domestic or international prosecution. In fact, Assad consistently denied that he had ordered his forces to shoot at civilians. He asserted, “Every “brute force” was by an individual, not by an institution, that’s what you have to know... No, there is a difference between having a policy to crack down and having some mistakes committed by some officials, there is a big difference.”²⁷

2.3 Primordial Sectarian Identity

Bashar’s policies of sectarian favoritism had eroded his regime’s social broad power base and had led to “sectarian contraction”; i.e., it evolved into, and was widely described as an Alawite-dominated regime.²⁸ During his foreign policy disasters (2003-2008), Bashar “piled up political debts from his family clan and the Alawite security establishment... Assad had nothing much other than his clan and the security apparatus on which to fall back. This made the president sink ever deeper into the self-interested power structure and reach the point of no return.”²⁹

Similarly, when the uprising erupted in 2011, Assad “retrenched and retreated into a typically Syrian authoritarian mode of survival, an Alawite fortress to protect the sect’s chokehold on power.”³⁰ Family and clan solidarity became Assad’s strategy to stave off a potential palace coup and the collapse of his regime. Randa Slim, a research fellow at the New American Foundation and a specialist in Syrian politics, argued that

²⁷ ‘Defiant Assad Denies Ordering Bloody Syrian Crackdown’ *ABC news*, December 7, 2011

²⁸ Carsten Wieland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 13

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 53

³⁰ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 240

The regime's core is now reduced to Assad family members and trusted Alawite security officials, some of whom are holdovers from the reign of Assad's father, Hafez. This core appears to consist of more hawkish figures who see the struggle in existential terms. As the inner circle gets smaller, the regime's response only becomes more determined and bloodier.³¹

Assad was able to convince minority communities, in particular his Alawite sect, that their survival was inextricably linked to the survival of the regime.³² Government forces acting hand in hand with its Shabiha militias committed atrocities against Sunnis to provoke violent sectarian responses and hence frighten the minorities into supporting the regime.³³ By inciting sectarian strife and inviting Shiite militia and mercenaries from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah to fight alongside Assad's forces, the regime primordialized the conflict and presented the Alawites, and other minorities by extension, with a stark choice: kill or be killed.³⁴ In fact, the Syrian regime used the "language of total war...to rally crucial segments of society into total mobilization" and the target audience of this "message of total war was the Alawite community."³⁵

In addition, since the Alawite-dominated regime had committed crimes in a massive scale, maintaining the regime in power became the Alawite's survival strategy. Therefore, the prospect of sectarian retribution held the Alawites together, suppressed potential internal discords or splits and encouraged the minority regime to rally around Assad. Cohesion, in the face of existential threat, prevented defections from the Alawite community and maintained Assad's undisputed decision making power.

³¹ Randa Slim 'The Survivor' *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2012

³² Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 16

³³ Carsten Wieland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 40

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 289-290

³⁵ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 52-53

2.4 The Formation of a Crisis Cell

In Egypt, Mubarak did not set up a crisis cell at the national level to centralize and coordinate his government's response to the crisis. As a result, his regime seemed gripped by chaos and confusion throughout the 18-day uprising. Egyptian officials provided contradicting statements to the media, the regime's coalition seemed split on several crisis policy issues and state institutions worked at cross-purposes. By contrast, Assad formed a crisis cell at the outset of Syria's domestic unrest, placed himself as its head and specified its operational functions. The crisis cell defined command relationships, the flow of procedures and the channels of communication. Most importantly, and as the leaked security plans revealed, the cell helped manage the war efforts by coordinating between different agencies regarding combat tasks, intelligence sharing and the optimization of resources and capabilities. Essentially, the crisis cell constituted the operational decision unit, which closely monitored the execution of operations, reviewed status reports and kept the president informed on the daily crisis developments.

By establishing a crisis cell and staffing it with absolute loyalists and disciplined commanders, Assad sidelined institutions, suppressed dissent within the regime's own coalition, rendered potential rivals powerless (such as isolating the vice president from both the authoritative and operational decision units) and hence reinforced his decision making power. The centralization of politico-military planning also helped minimize duplication of war effort, encouraged rapid exchange of information among an otherwise competing intelligence and security agencies, prevented conflicts in the lines of authority and, most importantly, allowed the government to speak with one voice to the world. In fact, one can argue that Assad's crisis management organization has been a major contributing factor to his regime's remarkable resiliency, staying power and cohesion despite its significant battlefield losses and erosion of authority.

2.5 The Military Remained Loyal, the Security Forces Intact

Unlike Egypt and Tunis where the military refused to shoot at the civilian population to save the regime, the Syrian military and security forces showed no mercy in their attempts to suppress the domestic unrest. Under closer inspection, the behavior of the Syrian military was not surprising. Indeed, Syria is likely to remain a textbook case study in the literature of civil-military relations of how a military doctrine that placed “regime survival [as the] foremost objective; superseding all other national security considerations”³⁶ and four-decades of extensive coup-proofing measures have both succeeded in keeping the armed forces loyal to the regime despite the raging civil war and the destruction of Syria’s sovereign nation state. Joshua Landis, the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, argued that there are two major reasons why the military remained loyal to the regime. First, the Syrian security structure “has been built on a system of coup-proofing...you don’t have one person in control of enough army units to carry out a coup.” Second, “the Alawite community and the military hierarchy have their backs to the wall... There are no good options for them and they’re going to face a very bleak future when this revolution is successful.”³⁷ Sectarian differences and perhaps the lack of affinity between the Alawite-dominant regime forces and the majority Sunni protesters enabled the former to wage a full-fledged war against the latter. Kheder Khaddour, a Syria expert at the Carnegie Center, explains

Army officers have access to a benefit system that links nearly every aspect of their professional and personal lives to the regime, and this places them in an antagonistic relationship with the rest of society...As many army officers come from impoverished rural backgrounds, home ownership in the capital would have been beyond their financial reach...Military housing has offered them an opportunity for social advancement...[and] foster[ed] a distinct identity that segregate[d] them from the rest of Syrian society, leaving them dependent on the

³⁶ Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 33-34

³⁷ Cajsa Wikstrom ‘Assad’s grip on Power’ *Al Jazeera News*, January 30, 2012.

regime...As the uprising descended into full-scale civil war, the ghettoization of the officer corps has played out in the regime's favor and prompted many officers to regard the revolution as a personal threat to their assets and livelihood.³⁸

In addition, because the regime had committed mass atrocities, “the specter of being decapitated by the opposition’s growing contingent of Sunni extremists is keeping the regime together.”³⁹ Therefore, a loyal military served to prevent changes in Syria’s domestic balance of power and a corresponding shift in Assad’s authoritative decision unit.

Another important factor is that the Syrian security forces remained largely intact throughout the crisis. In Egypt, when the security forces collapsed out of exhaustion, the military remained as the only viable coercive institution to salvage the Mubarak regime. The domestic balance of power shifted in favor of the armed forces, which saw its institutional interest better served by the removal of their commander in chief. Assad’s security forces persisted for several reasons. First, instead of engaging in running battles with protesters, the security forces employed disproportionate lethal force at the outset through snipers from roof tops and armored vehicles and successfully prevented protesters from occupying public squares across the country. Second, when the protests spread nationwide, instead of outstretching the police forces and risking their collapse, the Assad regime immediately switched to a military solution by deploying army units to besiege towns, bomb homes and impose restrictions on movement across the country.

Most importantly, the regime mobilized its notorious armed civilian militia, the *Shabiha*, who are predominantly unemployed Alawite ex-offenders that fanatically support the Assad regime. The *Shabiha* are mafia-like organizations that were established by the Assads and other

³⁸ Kheder Khaddour ‘Assad’s Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal’ *Carnegie*, November 4, 2015.

³⁹ Grace Abuhamad and Andrew J. Tabler ‘All the Tyrant’s men: Chipping Away at the Assad Regime’s Core’ *The Washington Institute*, August 23, 2013

Alawite elites in the 1970s to consolidate their control over specific areas and business activities. They operate outside the law, enjoying immunity from prosecution and engaging in smuggling goods, extortion and protection rackets. These armed gangs number in the tens of thousands and are known for their violence and cruelty.⁴⁰ Human Rights reports indicate that the Shabiha often accompany the Syrian forces and carry out the regime's most violent crimes during home raids including massacres and sexual violence.⁴¹ Therefore, the Shabiha not only provided the regime with a degree of deniability in regards to the mass atrocities committed, but it also took some of the weight off the regular security forces.⁴² In fact, Mahmoud Suleiman Haj, Inspector General of the Central Financial Monitoring Commission at the Prime Minister's office and the Defense Ministry's Chief Inspector (defected January 2012), indicated that the "financial documents show that the Syrian regime had paid billions of Syrian Lira to the Shabiha militias for repressing the protests across the country."⁴³ In addition, and with the help of the Iranian Quds Force, the Syrian regime mobilized, funded, trained and equipped thousands of pro-Assad civilian volunteers organized as popular committee militias and later made them into a formal militia called the National Defense Forces (NDF) to fight alongside Syrian security forces and, by 2013, to defend their neighborhoods from ISIS.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See for example: Yassin al-Hajj Saleh 'The Syrian Shabiha and their State-Statehood and Participation' *Heinrich Boll Stiftung Middle East*, March 3, 2014

⁴¹ See for example: 'Syria: Sexual Assault in Detention' *Human Rights Watch*, June 15, 2012

⁴² Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 60

⁴³ Interview. Mahmoud Suleiman Haj, *Al Jazeera News*. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxSyua1pHt4&app=desktop>

⁴⁴ see for example: Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer 'Iranian Strategy in Syria' *Institute for the Study of War*, May 2013

3. Configuration of the Authoritative Decision Unit

While the authoritative decision unit remained unchanged throughout the crisis; i.e., Assad and his inner circle continued to dominate the decision making power, the configuration of the decision unit evolved in response to the changing conditions on the ground. At the outset of the uprising, and as former officials have indicated, the decision unit can be best described as one led by a predominant leader in which Assad had the final say on policy choices. As the crisis escalated and prolonged, the influence of specific family members, top security officials and military commanders on the president's decision choices significantly grew. Assad became increasingly reliant on and indebted to several regime figures for his political survival. These included his brother Maher, the commander of the Republican Guards, his Makhoul cousins for their financial power and top security commanders in charge of cracking down on protesters.⁴⁵ As more individuals within Bashar's inner and outer circles gained bargaining power vis-à-vis the president and hence increased their influence on policymaking, the decision unit took the form of a single group, i.e., the decision was made collectively by several members within the leadership circle.

On December 2011, when Barbara Walters asked Assad if his forces had cracked down too hard on civilians, Assad responded "they are not my forces, they are military forces belong [sic] to the government... I don't own them. I am president. I don't own the country, so they are not my forces."⁴⁶ David Lesch comments that by saying "they are not my forces" Assad "most likely meant... that he is not all-powerful in Syria – and in this he is correct... Although he has a great deal of power – far more than anyone else in Syria – he often cannot act in an arbitrary manner."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See for example: Riad Hijab. Interview, in "In-depth" program, *Al Jazeera Channel*, Doha, Qatar. October 23, 2012 (Arabic)

⁴⁶ 'Defiant Assad Denies Ordering Bloody Syrian Crackdown' *ABC news*, December 7, 2011

⁴⁷ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 210

By 2012, Assad had increasingly relied on Hezbollah, Iran, Iraq and Russia for the supply of weapons, fighters, military advisors and financial aid. His reliance on international backers came at the expense of the state's decision-making autonomy.⁴⁸ In fact, the growing influence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG) had led analysts and former Syrian officials to describe the Iranian presence as an "occupying force".⁴⁹ Iranian troops became part of Assad's command structure and were leading offensive operations on the ground so much that, by 2013, Tehran was reportedly calling the shots in Syria.⁵⁰

Louay Mekdad, the political and media coordinator for the Free Syrian Army, indicated that Iran "has penetrated the institutions of the Syrian state" and that their influence on Assad's decision making centers "began with providing loans to the regime, then buying real estate in Damascus and its countryside, but it ended up resulting in full and direct control. Even the bodyguards of Assad are from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards."⁵¹ Iran exerted an unprecedented influence in Syria to such a degree that some "diplomats in the region believe[d] that Tehran today carrie[d] sufficient weight in Syria to effect Assad's removal and replace him with someone who could offer up the hope of a negotiated solution."⁵² The alarming Iranian dominance over Syria's decision power by mid-2015 has allegedly prompted Assad to turn to the Russians for help.⁵³ As

⁴⁸ For example, Brahimi stated that the Syrian government participated in Geneva II talks to please Moscow.

Susan Koelbl 'Interview with UN Peace Envoy Brahimi: 'Syria will become another Somalia' *Spiegel*, June 7, 2014.

⁴⁹ See for example: 'Iran in Syria: from an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force' *Naam Shaam Report*, November 2014.

⁵⁰ See for example: Michael Kelley 'Iran is Increasingly Calling the Shots for Assad in Syria' *Business Insider*, July 24, 2013.

⁵¹ 'Iranian's Growing Influence in Syria Vexes Russia' *The Syrian Observer*, July 1, 2015

⁵² Nicholas Blanford 'Iran's Influence is tied to Assad's Future' *The Atlantic Council*, May 12, 2015

⁵³ See for example: Christopher Reuter 'The Iranian Project: Why Assad Has Turned to Moscow for Help' *Spiegel*, October 6, 2015.

Russia deepens its military involvement to prop up the Assad regime, it is inevitable that Putin will be calling the shots in Syria.⁵⁴

The more Assad depends on his international allies for his staying power, the greater their influence over Syria's political and military choices and ultimately over the outcome of the Syrian civil war. Jeffrey White, a defense fellow at the Washington Institute, argued that "At this point, President Bashar al-Assad probably cannot decide the regime's course for the war on his own – like Rome inviting the barbarian tribes to defend its gates, he has effectively mortgaged his independence to his Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi allies...Assad is still standing, but he is not standing alone – and he likely no longer makes decisions alone either."⁵⁵ Since Tehran and Moscow had gained significant leverage over Syria by 2012, the authoritarian decision unit has taken the shape of a coalition of autonomous actors, i.e., there are multiple, separate and independent actors pursuing different strategic objectives and, hence, the final decision is the result of the concurrence of these actors over common goals.

Since the crisis began, Assad has given a number of interviews to Western journalists who have often described him as 'delusional' and a 'figurehead' who is only a 'prisoner of his security forces'. These assertions contradict the findings of this research. It is worth quoting David Lesch's comments at length:

[T]he post-interview analysis almost unanimously concludes he is delusional, detached, disconnected, or an out-and-out liar. Frankly, he probably is all of these things to some extent, but on the other hand, what does anyone expect him to say? The interviewers, searching for that "wow" moment when they can somehow get Asad to admit to one of the many atrocities purportedly carried out by his regime, invariably fail to do so... Asad understands that to indicate any culpability for something such as the use of chemical weapons or barrel bombs is also to punch a one-way ticket to the International Criminal Court. In addition, and maybe more

⁵⁴ See for example: Con Coughlin 'Vladimir Putin is Calling the Shots over Syria' *The Telegraph*, September 29, 2015.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey White 'Assad's Indispensable Foreign Legion' *The Washington Institute*, January 22, 2014.

importantly from his point of view, he is trying to come off to the West as the sane choice at the same time that the Islamic State is burning people alive. He seems calm, cool, and collected, as if he is, indeed, in control—a decent ally to have in the war against the far more evil Islamic State... [Assad also] still operates within a conceptual paradigm that is governed by paranoia and a default understanding that the United States and its allies have been consistently trying to get rid of him. So he comes off as out of touch, unrealistic, and even flippant, especially because his English—his third language—can sometimes work against him... He is not delusional in the sense of being crazy. It is a combination of strategy as well as the truly held belief, delusional or not, that he is, indeed, trying to save the country from terrorists. For him this is an easy conclusion to make since he believes he has had a target on his back for some time, long before 2011. It is how he views the world, and only if you spend a great deal of time in Syria do you understand that Assad and many of his supporters really do believe this, that it is not some sort of grand deception.⁵⁶

4. Findings and Conclusions

This chapter sought to investigate the hypothesis that *the authoritative decision unit changes during crises*. The findings in this Syrian case study do not corroborate the hypothesis since the decision unit remained unchanged throughout the crisis. In fact, the non-shift of the decision unit is one reason for the ongoing stalemate in the Syrian civil war: by preserving the domestic balance of power, no regime figure has emerged yet to change course, break the deadlock and lead a political transition. There were five major factors, which collectively prevented a shift in the authoritative decision unit.

First, when the uprising broke out, Assad had the advantage of being at the helm of a highly personalist regime that bestowed on him vast decision making powers on all critical policy issues. Second, crisis conditions and national security considerations enabled Assad to further centralize the crisis decision-making power onto the executive and hence sideline state institutions and

⁵⁶ 'Interviewing Assad- by David Lesch' *Syria Comment*, Web blog post, Joushualandis.com, March 8, 2015.

government officials who disagreed with his policy choices. Next, sectarian identity politics, whipping up fear within the Alawite community, and the prospect of sectarian retribution have all encouraged the minority regime to rally round Assad and suppressed dissent within the regime's own coalition. Fourth, Assad's crisis management organization defined command relationships and helped streamline channels of communication, coordinate war effort among state agencies and optimize resources and capabilities. Finally, four decades of coup-proofing measures had paid off: the military remained loyal to the regime at its darkest hours.

While Assad remained part of the authoritative decision unit throughout the crisis, his decisional power diminished gradually as domestic and international actors gained greater leverage over Syria. At the crisis outset, the decision unit was led by a predominant leader with Assad assuming the primary role in decision making. The decision process soon evolved into a single group as key regime figures improved their bargaining position vis-à-vis the president. As Assad increasingly relied on his international allies to stay in power, the configuration of the decision unit changed into one that is led by a coalition of autonomous actors. These developments do not bode well for neither the Assad regime nor Syria since their fates seem to have fallen in the hands of regional powers pursuing their own parochial strategic interests. Time is not on Assad's side since a quantitative change in the decision unit (as his decisional power continues to dilute) such developments will likely to lead to a qualitative change; i.e., a shift in the decision unit.

Chapter 13

International Costs and State Response

Numerous international and domestic factors influence the policy choices of any government. This chapter explores the hypothesis that *at the inception of a crisis, international costs do not influence the government's core crisis policy choices*. This research aims to assess whether or not international pressure factored in the Syrian government's decision and if so, to what extent. The underlying assumption is that international costs in the form of economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure do not exert a significant change in a regime's cost-benefit calculations at the crisis outset, and, that these costs accrue as a government continues to engage in serious human rights violations against its own people. This chapter answers the following questions: What were these international costs? How did the gradual buildup of international pressure manifest in the Syrian case? To what extent did it influence the Syrian crisis' outcomes? And why did international pressure fail to affect policy changes in the target state?

This chapter will not use coercion or coercive diplomacy as a theoretical framework to investigate the hypothesis. Coercion is the employment of limited force (short of war) to persuade the target state to comply with the demands of the pressuring state.¹ Coercive diplomacy or “forceful persuasion” places greater restrictions on military power and it refers to the threat of force or the use of “exemplary force” to compel the target state to change an objectionable policy or behavior.² In the Egyptian case, the international community applied neither coercion nor coercive diplomacy. This limitation was also true in Syria during the initial stages of the crisis

¹ Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002): p.30

² Alexander George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1991): p. 5-6

where both the world and regional powers exerted pressure without the threat or use of force. This chapter will assess whether or not international costs were influential on Assad's decision choices throughout the year 2011. First, this chapter examines how the international community cranked up the pressure on Assad using diplomatic and economic means. Then, it explores statements by (former) top Assad officials and Syria specialists on whether or not these pressures provoked a shift in the government's policy.

To be clear, international costs took many forms, including economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, increasing the media spotlight over Assad's human right abuses, naming and shaming Syrian officials in international fora, issuing critical public statements of Assad's policies, providing material and moral support to the Syrian opposition forces and challenging the regime's narrative in the global media. As will be explored in detail in this chapter, Assad's intransigence and refusal to heed the international community's prodding ultimately turned Syria into a rogue state –sanctioned, embattled and isolated. The restrictive measures imposed on Syria during 2011 failed to dissuade Assad from repressing his populace. Assad persisted instead in his policy to crush the uprising militarily to maintain his regime in power at all costs.

In the Egypt case study, the United States, and the European Union to a lesser extent, exerted the bulk of the international costs during the 18-day uprising and was aimed at compelling the Mubarak regime to end its brutal crackdown on protesters and initiate genuine political reforms. Russia and China released generic statements calling for restraint but ultimately played no role and, as authoritarian states themselves, they were likely not thrilled by the prospect of a popular uprising unseating a dictator from power and ushering democratic rule. In contrast, regional powers including Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states (with the exception of Qatar) backed Mubarak and sought to offset the international costs by issuing supportive statements and,

in private calls to US officials, urging the Obama Administration to moderate its stance towards the embattled Egyptian president with warnings of the potentially ensuing vacuum if Mubarak were to be overthrown.³ Like Egypt, Syria experienced the international response as generally split among three categories: First were the states that exerted their diplomatic weight to affect policy changes in Damascus. Second were those that played a marginal or inconsequential role throughout the crisis; and, third, were the strategic patrons and allies that stood by the Assad regime and used their political leverage to alleviate the weight of international pressure on their protégé. The net result of these clashing positions, as will be discussed in greater detail below, was that the international pressure exerted was not sufficient to induce policy shifts in Assad's government.

Before tackling the gradual buildup of international pressure on the Syrian regime, it is important briefly to put into context Syria's relations vis-à-vis its neighbors, regional and world powers on the eve of the uprising; i.e., to show how its international relations had been before they began to deteriorate. As discussed in chapter 10, Syria had benefitted from a regional and international détente since 2008.⁴ First, Syrian-Turkish relations improved so significantly that, by 2009, both countries lifted visas, held joint military exercises and increased their intelligence gathering cooperation.⁵ Turkish trade, investment and tourism in Syria surged and both leaders, Assad and Erdogan, developed a friendship and their families vacationed together.⁶ Turkey played a major role in ending Syria's isolation so much so that "Erdogan repeatedly interceded on Assad's behalf with the US, the EU, Iraq and the Gulf states, and, significantly, facilitated secret, if ultimately inconclusive, peace talks between Syria and Israel."⁷

³ Robert Gates, *Duty*, p. 506-507

⁴ Sami Moubayed 'Syria Confident of US détente' *Asia Times*, February 21, 2009.

⁵ See for example Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 106

⁶ See for example: 'Erdogan invites Assad for vacation in Turkey' *Turkish Daily News*, July 13, 2005

⁷ Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 106-107

Second, by 2010 Syria had fully reintegrated itself in the Arab world. The gradual opening of the Syrian economy allowed the Arab Gulf states to invest in Syria's infrastructure, tourism and real estate projects. Even Saudi-Syria relations, which were frayed by Assad's suspected role in Hariri's assassination (in Lebanon) and Damascus's alliance with Iran, ultimately gave way to cooperation. In June 2010, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia flew President Bashar in his private jet from Damascus to Beirut; a diplomatic gesture signaling the return of normal bilateral relations and, most importantly, of Riyadh's recognition of Damascus' undisputed prominence in Lebanese affairs.⁸

Syria played the role of spoiler in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. In 2008, the Syrian regime held secret talks with Israel regarding a possible peace deal. These efforts endeared Syria to Western powers and Arab states who were seeking to stabilize the region and decouple Damascus from Tehran as the latter grew increasingly defiant in its dispute over nuclear issues. In addition, European engagement and increased trade links with Syria culminated in Sarkozy's visit to Damascus in September 2008. And it was during this month that Secretary Rice met the Syrian foreign minister on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, signaling a change in the Bush Administration's approach to the Middle East and aligning relations with the recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton Report, which called for US direct talks with Syria in the quest to resolve the Iraqi crisis.⁹ On February 2010, President Obama named his ambassador to Syria as part of his policy of broadening American diplomacy. In short, the Syrian uprising erupted during a period when the Syrian regime had secured substantial diplomatic gains and was enjoying a foreign policy

⁸ Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 60

⁹ James Baker, Lee Hamilton et al, *The Iraq Study Group Report- The Way Forward, A New Approach* (Washington Dc: United States Institute of Peace, 2006)

honeymoon. Assad's government would have to spill a lot of Syrian blood before his international relations deteriorated and multilateral sanctions began to be of consequence.

The Syrian regime also had steadfast supporters that provided significant diplomatic shielding and critical supplies of funds, arms and fighters throughout the uprising. First, Iran considered Syria a key strategic ally, its main enabler in the Arab world, its only land supply route to its proxy militias in the Levant and, as a Shiite off-shoot, the Assad Alawite regime was the only other Shiite-led government in a sea of Sunni polities of the Arab Middle East. Since the eruption of the Syrian uprising, Iran has spared no effort or expense in propping up the Assad regime. Despite decades of crippling sanctions imposed on Tehran, Iran provided Syria with support worth up to \$35 billion a year, according to one estimate.¹⁰ Iran has contributed by deploying extensive military assets and manpower on Syrian territories, including its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground forces, Quds force and various elements from its intelligence and police units.¹¹ Iran's military involvement in Syria is so extensive that, between 2013 and December 1, 2015, anti-Assad forces killed nine Iranian generals in the Syrian battlefield.¹² No doubt, the collapse of the Alawite regime in Damascus would likely limit Iran's influence and its ability to project power in the Levant.

Second, Russia had, and continues to have, interests at stake in Syria. The Assad regime is a longstanding ally, the Syrian port of Tartus is home to the last Russian naval base in the Mediterranean and Syria is a key client for Russian weapons and training. Both governments share the common international outlook of opposing Western interventions and their destabilizing

¹⁰ Nicolas Blanford 'Why Iran is standing by its weakened, and expensive ally, Syria' *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 2015

¹¹ Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer 'Iranian Strategy in Syria' *Institute for the Study of War*, May 2013, p. 9

¹² '9 Iranian generals killed in Syria since 2013' *Alsouria*, December 1, 2015 (Arabic)

democratizing influence in the region. The loss of Syria to the ‘West’ would significantly curb Russia’s foothold and geopolitical influence in the Middle East. Worse, if the Assad regime is deposed, a democratic or a Sunni fundamentalist government in Damascus would not likely be friendly towards Moscow given Russia’s historic ties to the brutal dictatorship of the minority Alawite regime.¹³ In addition, the rise of Jihadi movements in the Levant could very well spill over to the northern Caucasus region. For the Russian leadership, “Syria is all too reminiscent of Chechnya... In Putin’s view – one that he stresses repeatedly in meetings with his U.S. and European counterparts – Syria is the latest battleground in a global multi-decade struggle between secular states and Sunni Islamism, which first began in Afghanistan with the Taliban, then moved to Chechnya, and has torn a number of Arab countries apart.”¹⁴ Most importantly for Moscow, regime-toppling protests in the Middle East, or anywhere in the world, “reflect instrumental concerns about political legitimacy and state cohesion within Russia and its near neighbors. It is this, more than any deep solidarity with the Syrian leadership or commitment to the material benefits of relations with the current Syrian state that has maintained Moscow’s alignment with Damascus.”¹⁵ In fact, a poll taken after protesters deposed Mubarak in Egypt, a Russian think tank found that 49 percent of Russians were willing to participate in a protest and 38 percent believed that the “Egyptian Scenario” was possible in Russia.¹⁶

Third, but with far less vested interests than those of Russia and Iran, China’s position on Syria is predicated on maintaining preferential trade ties in the region as well as maintaining its allegiance to the principle of non-interference in other states. Economically, Syria constitutes the

¹³ Mark Katz ‘Putin’s foreign policy towards Syria’ *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March, 2006): p. 8

¹⁴ Fiona Hill ‘The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad: Mistaking Syria for Chechnya’ *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2013

¹⁵ Roy Allison ‘Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis’ *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 795-823 (2013): p. 796

¹⁶ ‘Authoritarian Russia Watches As Middle East Unravels’ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 3, 2011.

final hub of the ancient Silk Road and by 2010, China had become Syria's largest importer.¹⁷ In addition, given its increasing dependence on energy imports, China had heavily invested in the Syrian national oil company.¹⁸ Most significantly, China, together with Russia, has firmly opposed Western military intervention and democratization by forcible regime change, the use of the language of humanitarian protection and the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to overthrow legitimate authorities in sovereign states. In 2011, both powers criticized NATO's operation in Libya for using the protection of civilians as a pretext to unseat Gaddafi from power. In the current Syrian crisis, China and Russia repeatedly blocked UN Security Council draft resolutions to sanction the Syrian regime, leading to an international impasse for this crisis. The prospect of domestic unrest is deeply troubling to the Chinese government given its systematic human rights abuses in the restive Tibet and Xinjiang regions. In fact, China blocked news and Internet searches about the protests in the Middle East and banned all forms of expressions of support for the Arab Spring.¹⁹

1. The Gradual Buildup of International Costs

The international community incrementally imposed pressures on the Assad regime to end the violent repression against protesters and to implement immediate democratic reforms in order to defuse the crisis. To better assess the buildup of international costs during 2011 and how it may have affected the regime's policy choices, the study breaks down the crisis into three phases.

¹⁷ Dana Kassab 'Enter the Dragon' Syria Today, December, 2010.

¹⁸ 'Factbox: Syria's Energy Sector' *Reuters*, August 14, 2011

¹⁹ Jonathan Pollack 'Unease from Afar', *Brookings* November 18, 2011

Phase 1: International Engagement for Regime-led Political Reforms (March – May)

In the first six months of the unrest, the international community's response focused on urging Assad to end his violence against unarmed demonstrators and to initiate immediate reforms; however, it stopped short of explicitly calling for his departure. The United Nations typically encourages regional organizations to play a major role in the peaceful settlement of conflicts before turning the matter to the Security Council. The Arab League, together with Turkey, used their leverage and exhausted all possible diplomatic means to push for a political solution and provide a 'soft landing' for the Assad regime. In fact, in a televised interview in June 2011, the Syrian foreign minister, Walid al-Muallem, urged "all Arab states, without exception, support the Syrian government, and the Syrian President has continued to contact the Arab leaders and myself, as I too have continued my contacts with my Arab counterparts."²⁰

The Arab states had hoped to dissociate Syria from Iran and break up the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis that exploited the Palestinian cause and the anti-American sentiments in the region to gain popularity among the Arab population and enable Iran to make inroads into Arab societies. Instead of using sticks, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies first offered Assad financial support, religious legitimacy and political cover from international pressure, but to no avail.²¹ On March 27, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called Assad and stressed "the Kingdom's support of Syria in confronting the conspiracy that aims to sabotage Syria's stability and security".²² In addition, Syria refrained from criticizing the GCC-backed intervention in the

²⁰ 'Al-Muallem: All Syrians are invited to the national dialogue, Syrians alone can decide their future' *SANA News*, June 22, 2011. (Arabic)

²¹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, p. 112

²² 'Assad received a phone call from Saudi King' *Syria News*, March 28, 2011. (Arabic)

Bahraini uprising, which “won Damascus some goodwill in Gulf capitals and led to muted early media coverage of the Syrian revolution.”²³

On March 27, Secretary Clinton stated in a CBS interview that, “There is a different leader in Syria now, many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he’s a reformer.” When asked about a potential US military intervention á la Libya in Syria, she said that “Each of these situations is unique”, and added that the current circumstances in Syria do not suggest that the U.S. would undertake military action. Similarly, when Secretary Gates was asked if President Assad should step down, he remarked that “these kind of things are up to the Syrians.”²⁴ However, the Obama administration gradually toughened its rhetoric against Assad after the latter’s first speech by urging the Syrian government to meet the demands of the Syrian people. In addition, when the Syrian forces escalated their violence on April 22 (Great Friday), President Obama condemned the violence and reiterated his calls for Assad to implement meaningful reforms.²⁵

The Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, expressed his support of Assad’s reform process.²⁶ At an April 26 press conference, Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, claimed that calls for regime change in Libya and now in Syria led to crises escalation by encouraging rebels to fight instead of seeking international mediation. He observed that the message of humanitarian intervention created a mindset in rebel camps that “the foreigners will help us” and that such sentiments would lead to “an invitation to a whole array of civil wars” in other parts of the world.²⁷

²³ Emile Hokayem ‘The Gulf States and Syria’ *United States Institutes of Peace*, Brief 116, September 30, 2011, p. 3

²⁴ ‘Clinton: No military action in Syria for now’ *CBS News*, March 27, 2011

²⁵ Kori Schulman ‘A Statement by President Obama on Syria’ *The White House*, April 22, 2011

²⁶ ‘Russian president voices support for ‘Syrian reforms’’ *NOW*, April 6, 2011

²⁷ Sergei Lavrov at a press conference in Tskhinvali, *BBC News*, April 26, 2011. Quoted in Roy Allison ‘Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis’ *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 795-823 (2013): p. 797

On April 28, both Russia and China blocked a Security Council, which proposed statement condemning the violence in Syria. The Russian Ambassador to the UN warned against “taking sides... [that could] lead to a never ending cycle of violence.”²⁸ In early May, Russia also blocked the publication of a UN report that incriminated Iran for sending arms to Assad in violation of UN-imposed sanctions on Tehran.²⁹

On April 29, President Obama signed executive order 13672, which imposed sanctions on specific individuals within the Assad regime.³⁰ Analysts argued that this measure would not be of any consequence since Assad had no financial assets in the United States.³¹ On May 10, the European Council passed resolution 442/2011, which imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime that included freezing the assets of a number of Syrian officials (but not on Assad’s), an arms embargo, ban on oil imports and a travel ban on members of Bashar’s al-Assad inner circle.³² However, these restrictions were not enforced by the EU until November 15, 2011 (the oil embargo in December 2011).³³ On May 17, Secretary Clinton called on Assad to “respond to the demands of the people by a process of credible and inclusive democratic change.”³⁴ Also, President Obama stated that “Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way.”³⁵

²⁸ ‘UN Powers Clash over Syria strife’ *Khaleej Times*, April 28, 2011

²⁹ ‘Envoys: Russia blocks UN report on Iran arms sale to Syria’ *Jerusalem Post*, May 13, 2011

³⁰ See for example: ‘Executive Order 13572 – Blocking Property of Certain Persons with Respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria’ *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, April 29, 2011

³¹ ‘Syria Sanctions Won’t Have much Bite’ *Center for New American Security*, May 18, 2011

³² See for example: Ian Traynor ‘EU slaps arms embargo on Syria but spares President Bashar al-Assad’ *The Guardian*, May 9, 2011

³³ See for example: ‘US and EU sanctions continue to evolve in response to events in the Middle East and North Africa’ *Lexology*, September 1, 2011; Francesco Giumelli and Paul Ivan ‘The effectiveness of EU sanctions: An analysis of Iran, Belarus, Syria and Myanmar (Burma)’ *Europe Policy Center*, Issue paper No. 76, November 2013, p. 25

³⁴ See for example: Lachlan Carmichael ‘US, Europe warn Syria of further steps within days’ *Agence France-Presse*, May 17, 2011

³⁵ ‘Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa’ *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, May 19, 2011

In short, during this initial period of the uprising, the Arab states and Turkey gave Assad the benefit of the doubt on his promises of reform and extended their mild support to his government. The United States and the EU demanded that Assad end the violence and negotiate a political compromise with the protesters, but they refrained from calling for him to step down. At most, the US and EU applied ‘smart sanctions’ that targeted specific top Assad officials. However, given the longstanding economic sanctions on the Syrian regime, Syrian officials had little, if any, assets in the United States or Europe. Assad shrugged off diplomatic moves and economic disincentives and stayed the course on his policy of suppressing dissent.

Phase 2: Calls for Assad’s Resignation (June – August)

By early summer, the regional tumult brought about by the Arab uprisings was on full display. The GCC states had to grapple with the fallout in Bahrain and the fear of chaos and the unraveling of yet another Arab state prompted the Arab League to play a cautious role in the Syrian crisis. On July 13, the General Secretary of the Arab League (AL), Nabil al-Arabi, met President Bashar in Damascus. Al-Arabi criticized the United States for ‘overstepping its bounds’ by suggesting that Assad had lost legitimacy and he declared, “Syria has entered a new era and is now moving on the road to genuine reform.”³⁶ Istanbul maintained its relations with Damascus, but in the quest to prod the Syrian government to adopt a political solution, Turkey hosted the Syrian opposition groups on July 16, who subsequently declared the establishment of the National Salvation Council. The Turkish move was tantamount to a de facto recognition of the Syrian opposition as a legitimate political representative of the Syrian people, thus challenging Assad’s

³⁶ ‘Arabi meets Assad: It’s up to people to decide Legitimacy of a Leader’ *Nahar Net*, July 13, 2011

domestic and international legitimacy. Similarly, a week earlier, on July 7, the American and French Ambassadors Robert Ford and Eric Chevallier visited the Syrian opposition's stronghold in Hama and spoke to protesters. Their visit attracted media attention, galvanized the biggest crowds since the uprising erupted and, for many Syrians, signaled the Western support of the uprising and the commitment to throw light and shame onto the Syrian regime for its continued human rights abuses. The Syrian government swiftly condemned the Ambassadors' "unauthorized visit" and accused Washington and Paris of inciting domestic unrest in the region.³⁷

By early August, Assad's marked escalation of the repression during Ramadan prompted many states to come out of their silence, voice their criticism publicly and 'turn the diplomatic screws' on Syria. On August 6, the GCC released its first statement appealing to end the violence in Syria.³⁸ The next day, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia recalled their ambassadors from Syria. In addition, the Saudi monarch, upped the rhetorical ante declaring, "What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia... Syria should think wisely before it's too late and issue and enact reforms that are not merely promises but actual reforms... Either it chooses wisdom on its own or it will be pulled down into the depths of turmoil and loss."³⁹ On the same day, the Arab League issued its first condemnation of Assad's brutal crackdown and the Arab states began downgrading their relations with Syria by withdrawing ambassadors and closing down their embassies.⁴⁰

On August 9, and in a last-ditch effort to end the bloodshed, Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, flew to Damascus to deliver a "decisive message" and an ultimatum from

³⁷ 'French and US ambassadors visits bolster Hama protests' *France 24*, July 9, 2011

³⁸ 'GCC urges end to Syrian 'bloodshed' calls for reforms' *Al-Arabiya News*, August 6, 2011

³⁹ 'Saudi Arabia calls for Syrian reforms' *Al Jazeera News*, August 8, 2011

⁴⁰ Liz Sly 'Syria step up assaults on protesters, drawing first Arab League condemnation' *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2011

Turkey's leadership.⁴¹ Davutoglu spent six hours meeting with Assad in an attempt to convince him to suspend the military operations and commit to a meaningful national dialogue. Assad was adamant warning the Turkish foreign minister saying: "if you came for a compromise, then we reject it. If you want to have war, then you can have it – in the entire region."⁴² On August 18, and for the first time, President Obama explicitly called on Assad to step down.⁴³

The international community's deadlock on Syria persisted as Russia and China threw a wrench into the UN Security Council's machinery thus sabotaging its efforts. The Security Council president could only issue a non-binding statement expressing his grave concern at the deteriorating situation in Syria. While the Council's president "condemn[ed] the widespread violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities" he urged "all sides to act with utmost restraint" and reaffirmed the Council's "strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria" while stressing that "the only solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process."⁴⁴ He carefully phrased his statement to appease Russia and China, which had refused to exert any pressure on Assad's government.

In short, by August Arab engagement and Western ambivalence had turned into frustration and disappointment. It took the Arab states and Turkey six months before relations deteriorated, and for the Obama Administration to explicitly call on Assad to step down. Russia and China

⁴¹ Simon Cameron-Moore 'Turkey's Friendship with Syria Nears Breaking Point' *Reuters*, August 8, 2011

⁴² 'unruhen in Syrien 'Wenn Sie Krieg wollen, können Sie ihn haben' *Süddeutsch Zeitung*, August 9, 2011. (German) Translated by and quoted in Carsten Wieland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 57

⁴³ See for example: Jason Ukman and Liz Sly 'Obama: Syrian President Assad must step down' *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011

⁴⁴ United Nations, *Statement by the President of the Security Council, S/PRST/2011/16*, August 3, 2011

continued to block anti-Syria resolutions, while Russia and Iran remained steadfast supporters of Assad, both financially and militarily.

Phase 3: Sanctions, Diplomatic Isolation and Threats to Internationalize the Syrian Crisis (September – December)

The Arab League (AL), which until then had taken a hands off approach to the Syrian crisis, began to increase its involvement in the quest to provide a soft landing for the Syrian conflict. It proposed a plan to kick-start a national dialogue between the Syrian regime and the opposition in which all parties would commit to the principles of ‘no violence, no religious and sectarian instigation and no military intervention.’ On September 11, the AL Secretary General, Nabil al-Arabi, met Assad and discussed the League’s 13-point proposal to end the conflict, hold elections and implement speedy reforms. Al-Arabi stressed the League’s rejection of “any form of foreign interference in Syria’s domestic affairs.”⁴⁵

On October 4, Russia and China vetoed a draft Security Council resolution condemning Syria’s “grave and systematic human right violations” against protesters and considered “measures under Article 41 of the Charter of the United Nations” that allowed for sanctions. Both Russia and China argued that the threat of sanctions was counterproductive and stressed the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of UN member states.⁴⁶ Both powers believed that Security Council Resolution 1973 on the situation in Libya became a Trojan horse for overthrowing Gaddafi from power; therefore, they blocked Western attempts that would allow for similar action

⁴⁵ ‘The Arab League rejects foreign interference’ *The Daily Star*, September 11, 2011

⁴⁶ ‘Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria’s Crackdown on Anti-Government Protesters, Owing to Veto by Russian Federation, China’ *Security Council*, October 4, 2011

in Syria. In addition, in the absence of common rules on when to allow cooperation with dictatorships versus when to allow their overthrow, Russian foreign minister Lavrov argued that the international community should focus on “preventing the collapse and disappearance of secular states and the coming of radicals and extremists to power.”⁴⁷

In early October, Assad initially agreed to the Arab League’s plan that demanded a cease-fire, the withdrawal of troops from cities and the release of political prisoners, but then he almost immediately disregarded it.⁴⁸ Damascus stalled at every junction, which prompted Arabs to raise the stakes. On November 12, the AL announced it would suspend Syria’s membership in the organization for rejecting the agreed to Arab peace plan. Suspension from the Arab League was a decisive blow to Syria’s Pan-Arab image in which it had long been described by Arab peoples as the ‘beating heart of Arabism’. The Arab League gave Syria four days to reconsider its policy before the suspension would take effect. Assad was unyielding and the suspension went into effect on November 16. With the exception of Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, the Arab League member states withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus. On November 27, they imposed economic sanctions on Syria that included travel bans of Syria’s top officials and ceased transactions with the Syrian central bank. Arab states also terminated their investments in Syria and suspended its membership in the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA).⁴⁹

Ultimately, Arab and UN diplomacy had no effect on the Syrian government’s behavior. David Lesch argued, “On the ground in Syria, it seemed very clear that the regime believed the

⁴⁷ Opening remarks by S.V. Lavrov at a press conference held in Moscow, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation official website*, January 23, 2013.

Available from: http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/240B78C5F181088344257B040030FE8F

⁴⁸ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 449-450

⁴⁹ See for example: Neil MacFarquhar and Nada Bakrinov ‘Isolating Syria, Arab League Imposes Broad Sanctions’ *The New York Times*, November 27, 2011

failure of the UN Security Council resolution (and thus the Arab League plan) gave it a green light to escalate the military pressure on the rebels.”⁵⁰ In December, when the AL threatened to take the Syrian problem to the United Nations, Assad agreed to the Arab proposal of sending a monitoring mission to collect data and issue a report on the Syrian compliance with its promises of ending the violence and implementing reforms. While it accepted the mission, Damascus stalled for over six weeks to hammer out the details of accessibility to sites and the number of observers among other things. In the end, the mission proved a complete failure and the killing continued under the observers’ gaze. The drama of the Arab League-led monitoring mission is best summed up by Fouad Ajami:

The cat-and-mouse game was being played to perfection. The Arab monitors – all fifty of them – were on the scene as the bombardment of Homs continued. The city was under siege, entire neighborhoods without food, electricity or water. It did not bode well for this Arab League mission that it was headed by Lieutenant General Mohammed al-Dabi, a Sudanese military man and security officer who was protégé of Sudan’s President Omar Bashir...The assignment must have come his way because the Syrians insisted on a chief observer from a regime friendly to them...General Dabi had not disappointed the authorities in Damascus. He had gone to Homs, but he didn’t see anything “frightening”...By the Darfur standard the statement was accurate...When the monitors headed next to Deraa...thousands had turned out for a mass rally and the security forces had fired on the crowd. No great deference was shown these monitors – and it’s no wonder they came to be dubbed the Arab spectators...A placard, held aloft by a group of Homs women, put the diplomatic-speak to shame. “All doors are closed, expect yours, Oh God.”⁵¹

In short, the international community relied on the Arab League for a regionally led multilateral solution of the Syrian Crisis. The AL suspended and sanctioned the Assad regime to no avail since Damascus did not enter the negotiations in good faith but instead, used the Arab mediation to gain time to repress the protests. At the time, the International Crisis Group report

⁵⁰ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 196

⁵¹ Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 171

stated that “[t]here is little doubt that the sanctions are having a significant economic impact, but it remains unclear whether they are having a political one – and whether whatever political benefits might accrue outweigh the inevitable socio-economic costs.”⁵² Wieland argued, “[T]he regime remained obstinate, put up with international sanctions and acquiesced to the erosion of its own economic foundations.”⁵³ The disincentives provided by the broad Arab, American and European economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation failed to alter the regime’s crisis policy and behavior.

2. International Cost’s Impact on the Regime’s Policy Calculus

Assad’s harsh repression of protesters continued unabated despite mounting international punitive measures. When asked how the regime remained intact in the face of the crippling sanctions, Riad Hijab said, “[I]nstitutions were in a state of disarray, the economy was in the brink of collapse, morale was low...but what kept the Syrian state running was the continued Russian and Iranian economic and military support.”⁵⁴ The Syrian regime was adamant about suppressing the uprising militarily at all costs and managed to mitigate the impact of the sanctions that were imposed by diverting some of the country’s trade to other markets such as Russia, Iraq, Iran and other allies in the region.⁵⁵ The former spokesperson of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jihad Makdissi, responded to this author’s e-mail request to comment on the influence of the sanctions on Assad’s decision making stating:

The sanctions didn't prevent the government eventually from continuing the confrontational behavior or policies because they are strong and have loyal and strong

⁵² ‘Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria’s Dynamics’ *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Briefing No. 31, November 24, 2011, p. 7

⁵³ Carsten Wieland, *A Decade of Lost Chances*, p. 122

⁵⁴ Riad Hijab. Interview, in “Special Meeting” program. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. September 27, 2012 (Arabic)

⁵⁵ Jessica Donati and Julia Payne ‘How Russia, Iran keep fuel flowing to Syria’ *Reuters*, April 26, 2012; Sonni Efron ‘In Syria, try banks before bombs’ *Reuters* August 29, 2013

regional and international backers till today. The government made cabinet decisions to contain some of the sanctions especially in the economic field by moving assets from abroad or looking for different markets for imports and exports, securing fuel supply, and controlling the exchange rates of foreign currency among other measures.⁵⁶

There was, and still is, a mismatch between the high demands placed on Syria by the international community (for Assad to step down, read: regime change) and the punitive measures imposed on the Syrian regime (sanctions absent credible military threat). Assad resisted international pressure because concessions would have most probably resulted in a loss of power and quite possibly in the loss of his life. For Assad, the international costs levied on the Syrian regime did not outweigh the political value of remaining at the helm. In an interview for France's *Le Figaro* newspaper, Assad said that Western leaders "assumed that they could easily influence a young president, that if I had studied in the West I would lose my original culture. This is such a naive and shallow attitude. I have not changed; they are the ones who wished to identify me differently at the beginning."⁵⁷ Highly authoritarian regimes do not negotiate their exit from power and Gaddafi's reaction to the popular uprising is a case in point. Despite NATO's aerial bombing, the dictator rejected demands for reforms and persisted in his savage violence against his rebellious population until his last breath.

Equally important, concessions in the face of sanctions might have signaled the regime's weakness and/or its policy failures, which could have in turn encouraged a coup or emboldened the Syrian opposition to double its demands for Assad to step down. Therefore, Assad resisted policy change perhaps out of a concern for the audience costs associated with the humiliation of

⁵⁶ Jihad Makdissi 'Re: Student from Tufts University' *E-mail message to Rashed Al Dhaheri*, December 10, 2015.

⁵⁷ 'President Bashar al-Assad's interview with *Le Figaro*' *Information clearing House*, September 3, 2013

losing face, backing down and caving in to external pressure.⁵⁸ In a televised interview with CNN host Christiane Amanpour on September 2013, Ryan Crocker, former US Ambassador to Syria, stated that “Assad isn’t going anywhere outside of Syria anytime soon, if ever... The Syrian regime has been ready for this fight since Hama in 1982.”⁵⁹

The international community’s economic sanctions were designed to dry up the financial resources available to the Assad regime and hence break the regime’s system of privileges and its patronage networks. The underlying assumption of imposing the sanctions was that Assad would lose the loyalty of his powerful elites and his socio-political constituency and that this would hence induce a split within the regime as people would begin to jump ship.⁶⁰ Joshua Landis argued that the Alawite community would remain loyal “even as the economy deteriorates... Most fear collective punishment for the sins of the Baathist era... Many do not expect an orderly transition of power, just as many remain convinced that a spirit of revenge may guide the opposition.”⁶¹ Meghan O’Sullivan, former deputy national security advisor on Iraq and Afghanistan and author of *Shrewd Sanctions*, concurs. She observed that “no amount of economic pressure is likely to convince those loyalists that they will be better off in a post-Assad world; dismal economic

⁵⁸ For more on audience costs see, James D. Fearon ‘Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes’ *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3, pp. 577-592 (September 1994); James Fearon ‘Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 68-90 (February 1997); Alastair Smith ‘International Crises and Domestic Politics’ *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 92, No. 3, pp. 623-638 (September 1998); Matthew A. Baum ‘Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 5, pp. 603-631 (October 2004)

⁵⁹ ‘Syria can only be contained, not extinguished, top former U.S. diplomat Ryan Crocker tells CNN’s Amanpour’ *CNN News*, September 11, 2013.

⁶⁰ Peter Seeberg ‘The EU and the Syrian Crisis: The Use of Sanctions and the Regime’s Strategy for Survival’ *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 18-35 (2015): p. 27

⁶¹ Joshua Landis ‘The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Asad Regime is Likely to Survive to 2013’ *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Spring 2012): p. 2

prospects will always be much more attractive than the organized revenge killings and systematic discrimination by the state that many fear will be their future once Assad is gone.”⁶²

3. Findings and Conclusions

This chapter sought to explore the proposition that at the outset of a popular uprising, international costs play an insignificant role in a government’s policy calculus. This case study corroborates the proposition’s assertion since traditional diplomacy failed to dissuade the regime from Assad’s policy choices of repressing the protests and rejecting the possibility of a political settlement to the Syrian conflict. In the first three months of the uprising (March – May), the Arab states and Turkey took the lead in dealing with Assad and in so doing, they extended what can only be considered as mild support, giving him the benefit of the doubt that he would keep his promises of reform. Western powers condemned the violence but refrained from calling on him to step down and, at most, imposed smart sanctions that would only take effect six months later.

In the next three months of the crisis (June – August) and after all prodding had failed to sway Assad from his savage repression, Arabs and Turks increased the pressure by hosting Syria’s opposition forces and increasing the media’s attention on the regime’s human rights abuses. Western officials played a vital role on shaming the Syrian regime by declaring that Assad had lost his legitimacy, and this culminated with president Obama explicitly calling for Assad to step down. In the last phase (September – December), the Arab League and Turkey adopted a hands-on approach and exhausted all diplomatic means to mediate between the government and the opposition and to push for a political settlement of the conflict, but this was to no avail. The regime

⁶² Meghan L O’Sullivan ‘Sanctions Alone Won’t Topple Syria’s Assad’ *Bloomberg View*, February 22, 2012

was unyielding and did little more than prevaricate. It took six months before bilateral relations between the regional states and Damascus began to fray. Ultimately, and despite the significant measures taken of isolating and eroding the regime's economic foundations, all disincentives failed to affect a policy shift and end the Syrian bloodshed.

While this case study demonstrates the limits of diplomatic pressure in inducing policy change in the target state, it is important to mention some of the broader international, regional and domestic factors that helped moderate the effects of the sanctions and emboldened Assad's resistance to all restrictive measures throughout the period. First, Russia and China exploited the NATO debacle in Libya as a pretext to resist any military intervention through the UN framework in Syria. Secretary Clinton argued that "the Russians were implacably opposed to anything that might constitute pressure on Assad."⁶³ The NATO intervention in Libya was widely criticized for having exceeded its UN mandate moving from protecting civilians to regime change. Critics argued that NATO intervened in a civil war, not a genocide, and as its forces sided with the rebels (arguably serving as their air force) against the embattled government, they veered off the UN core mission of humanitarian protection.⁶⁴ President Putin argued forcefully that the conflict in Syria would not end simply by deposing the Assad regime; for him "the Syrian government and the opposition in this case would just switch places, but the fighting would continue."⁶⁵

Both Russia and China rejected the notion of "regional legitimacy" with which regional organizations such as the Arab League could endorse a military intervention in a member state and, with this both powers showed their determination to block any attempt towards United

⁶³ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 450

⁶⁴ See for example: Simon Jenkins 'By merely bolstering the weaker side, we are prolonging the Libya's civil war' *The Guardian*, March 31, 2011

⁶⁵ Dmitri Trenin 'The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy' *Carnegie Moscow Center*, February 2013, p. 11

Nations-imposed sanctions or a Chapter VII intervention. Both powers frustrated other international efforts and vetoed a draft resolution referring Syria to the International Criminal Court.⁶⁶ Broadly speaking, the commitment to Syria reflected the non-Western powers' (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS)) concerted attempt to challenge the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and to prevent the crystallization of an international norm in which separatist, insurgent or secessionist movements could be legitimized under the banner of humanitarian protection. Russia feared Chechen, China the Tibet and India the Kashmir region (India was at the time a non-permanent member of the Security Council and abstained on the Syria resolutions).⁶⁷ These developments provided the Syrian regime with a significant international political cover; they precluded the possibility of a UN-sanctioned intervention à la Libya in Syria and, perhaps encouraged Assad to stay the course of cracking down on dissent.

Second, the Assad regime seemed to have believed that the U.S. would not use force to topple the government as it did in Iraq; i.e., acting outside the UN charter. Public polls at the time showed that the American people were not interested in getting mired in another quagmire in the Middle East. By 2011, the U.S. had just withdrawn its troops from Iraq, the economy was still reeling from the worst financial crisis since the depression and mid-term presidential elections were nearing for an incumbent who had been elected on the platform of ending US engagements in the region. In fact, early in the Syrian uprising, the Obama Administration said it would not intervene in Syria.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Syria is not party to the Rome Statute and, therefore, under international law, a referral by the UN Security Council is presently the only avenue for the international Criminal Court (ICC) to have jurisdiction over crimes committed in Syria. On May 22, 2014, both Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution for referring Syria to the ICC.

'Referral of Syria to International Criminal Court Fails as Negative Votes Prevent Security Council from Adopting Draft Resolution' *Security Council*, SC/11407, May 22, 2014.

⁶⁷ See for example: James Traub 'Will the Good BRICS Please Stand Up?' *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2012

⁶⁸ 'US will not intervene in Syria as it has in Libya, says Hillary Clinton' *The Guardian*, March 27, 2011

U.S. officials reiterated this position several times throughout 2011 and, on October, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that “NATO has no intention (to intervene) whatsoever [in Syria]. I can completely rule that out.”⁶⁹ Dave Barno, a retired US Lt. General and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations argued at the beginning of the uprising, “Assad is crystal clear that the US is not coming to Damascus to prevent him from crushing the rebellion, and he’s 100 percent right about that...in a sense we intervened in Libya because we could. But Syria is a lot more like Iran than it is like Libya. It’s a police state which is willing to do virtually anything to hold on to power.”⁷⁰

In addition, the fact that Assad possessed advanced Russian air defenses and the desire not to upset the Iranian government while pursuing a potential settlement on the nuclear issue gave the Obama Administration further reasons to not employ the military option in Syria.⁷¹ Essentially, the absence of a credible military threat helped Assad resist all sanctions and engage in delaying tactics while he remained secure in the knowledge that a Western-led intervention was a distant possibility.

Third, Syria received significant economic support from allies that helped the regime withstand the economic hardships, sustain a minimally functioning economy and prevent a total collapse. According to the UN peace envoy to Syria, Staffan De Mistura, Iran alone contributes about \$6 billion annually to Assad’s government since the start of the uprising. Also, Nadim Shehadi, director of the Fares Center at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, indicated that according to his research, Tehran provided military and economic aid to the Assad regime worth up to \$15 billion during the 2012-2013 period despite the crippling sanctions imposed on Iran.

⁶⁹ ‘NATO says will not intervene in Syria’ *Reuters*, October 31, 2011

⁷⁰ Yochi Dreazen ‘Why the US Won’t Act on Syria’ *The Atlantic*, May 13, 2011

⁷¹ See for example: Kassem Eid ‘The Rubble of Obama’s Syria Policy’ *The Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2015.

When considering other forms of provisions which included oil transfers, the support of Iranian military personnel in Syria, extending the lines of credit and numerous other subsidies, Steven Heydemann, estimated the total annual Iranian support to Syria to be between \$15 and \$20 billion.⁷² And yet another source puts the estimate at \$35 billion yearly.⁷³ Spending billions of dollars from its limited financial resources demonstrated the extent of Iran's commitment to Assad's regime. In fact, President Hassan Rouhani declared that Iran would back Assad 'until the end of the road'.⁷⁴

Fourth, Syrians have a deep sense of distrust of foreign intentions which perhaps motivated Assad's resistance to making concessions in the face of international pressure. This distrust has developed out of a mix of several socio-historical elements including the bitter colonial legacy of the Ottomans and the French, the successive defeats by Israel, a sense of continued regional meddling in Syria's domestic affairs, the long Western hostility against the Syrian regime, a Pan Arab Baathist ideology that is ultra-sensitive to foreign agendas and a minority regime that has nurtured a conspiratorial mindset among Syrians. When Libya conceded and handed over the suspects charged with bombing the Pan Am flight in 1988, Western powers increased their pressure on Gaddafi demanding that he should also renounce his support of terrorism and abandon his WMD program before they would lift sanctions.⁷⁵ The Assad regime was apprehensive of 'the slippery slope of concessions'; i.e., once the target state makes concessions, the pressuring states

⁷² Eli Lake 'Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad' *Bloomberg View*, June 9, 2015.

⁷³ Nicholas Blanford 'Why Iran is standing by its weakened, and expensive, ally Syria' *Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 2015.

⁷⁴ See for example: Louise Loveluck 'Iran promises to back Assad 'until the end of the road' *The Telegraph*, June 2, 2015

⁷⁵ See for example: 'Qaddafi comes clean' *The Economist*, December 29, 2003

become strengthened to demand further concessions.⁷⁶ Syria has had its own disappointing experiences and Scheller best sums up this argument:

On more than one occasion, namely in the Middle East peace process and in the so-called “war on terrorism”, the Syrian government has felt that its cooperation has not been rewarded. Syria has experienced this kind of disappointment in its relations with the United States and Europe, which, from a Syrian point of view, have offered incentives but, upon Syrian compliance, have simply imposed further conditions instead. This explains why neither incentives nor pressure from outside seem to work particularly well with Syria: history has taught the Syrian government that cooperation is not rewarded, and that, when under pressure, the most rational choice is to remain inactive and wait for better times.⁷⁷

Fifth, Syria had long been under a sanction regime and its economy has never fully been open and integrated in the world market. Therefore, Western powers had little leverage against Assad as a senior US official described at the beginning of the uprising: “It’s appalling to look at what’s happening in Syria, and it’s even worse to know that we really can’t do much to stop it...The Syrian government knows it can act with a certain amount of impunity because we have no real leverage over them.”⁷⁸ Syria’s partly closed economy may have initially helped absorb the sanctions’ shocks, but ultimately, the sanctions’ regime severely battered the Syrian economy. By late 2011, international trade and investment in Syria halted, tourism disappeared, the Syrian pound was in a free fall, its foreign-currency reserves were rapidly shrinking and international credit cards had ceased operations in the country. The US and EU sanctions on Syrian oil led to a monthly loss of \$400 million. Syria had to turn eastward to meet its market needs and continued

⁷⁶ Jack Hirshleifer et al ‘The Slippery Slope of Concessions’ *Economic Inquiry*, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 197-205 (2009)

⁷⁷ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game*, p. 9

⁷⁸ ‘Syria Sanctions Won’t Have Much Bite’ *National Journal*, May 18, 2011

to trade with Arab neighbors such as Iraq and Lebanon, which refused to apply the Arab League's sanctions.⁷⁹

Sixth, and most importantly, traditional diplomacy let alone coercion and coercive diplomacy all have poor track records of inducing policy changes in authoritarian regimes, particularly regarding matters that affect their political survival. In the last two decades alone, several cases of coercive diplomacy have failed to compel dictators to alter their behavior or strategies. Some of these include Saddam Hussein in 1990 (to withdraw from Kuwait) and in 2003 (to leave Iraq and hand over power); the Taliban in 2001 (to hand over Osama Ben Laden), and also Gaddafi on numerous occasions in the 1980s and 90s. Both Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi chose to fight and ultimately risked their lives rather than seeking safe haven outside their countries. Therefore, international costs in the form of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation failed to persuade Assad to step down and cease his brutal repression of protesters particularly in the absence of credible military threat. These findings corroborate the existing literature which point out that sanctions alone are largely ineffective in inducing a policy shift in the target state.

Gary Hufbauer, et al., found that out of 174 cases, sanctions were

at least partially successful in 34 percent of the cases...However, the success rate importantly depended on the type of policy or governmental change sought...Cases involving attempts to change regimes (e.g., by destabilizing a particular leader or by encouraging an autocrat to democratize), to impair a foreign adversary's military potential, or to otherwise change its policies in a major way succeeded in about 30 percent of those cases.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ 'Sanctions against Syria: As effective as bullets, maybe' *The Economist*, December 3, 2011.

⁸⁰ Gary Hufbauer et al., *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, 3rd Ed. (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009): p. 158-159

In conclusion, this chapter shows the limits of international diplomacy as a foreign policy tool to influence the behavior of the target state on the onset of domestic insurrection. International costs played little, if any role, in Assad's policy choices. The above-mentioned six factors also help explain why Syria proved to be a difficult, if not impossible, problem to solve. In this particular Syrian case study, the absence of a credible military threat and the significant political cover and economic support provided by Syria's patrons were very consequential in enabling Assad to surmount international pressure and persist in his policies.

Chapter 14

Crisis Management and Strategic Response

Uprisings constitute a serious threat to the national security of any state. Failure to develop appropriate contingency plans and to formulate and implement sound, comprehensive and well-resourced policy-strategy responses to confront mass protests and insurgencies can lead to national disasters. As witnessed by some Arab-Spring states, when the political authority lacks both the national vision and strategic foresight to handle domestic revolts and, fails to prioritize national interests and synchronize between its objectives and the means to achieve them, these shortcomings may transform a manageable crisis into an intractable conflict that can jeopardize both national stability and the political survival of the incumbent regime. This chapter investigates the hypothesis that authoritarian governments are unlikely to prosecute a coherent crisis management strategy while a regime maintains a monopoly over the crisis decision making process at the highest authority levels and pursues short term goals. In exploring the Syrian government's crisis management strategies, this chapter will address the following questions: What were the regime's policy goals? Did the regime employ appropriate strategies to achieve its intended ends? How did Assad's government manage the process of matching its ends with the means utilized?

It is not the goal of this chapter to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Syria's conflict as this struggle is ongoing. The chapter will not tackle specific combat operations, tactical measures nor will it evaluate battlefield effectiveness. The chapter's goals are to define the regime's stated policy objectives, identify the strategies it pursued to achieve said objectives and assess whether or not the regime achieved them. Chapter 12, which addressed the decision-making unit, demonstrated that Assad maintained significant decisional power throughout the crisis and civil

war periods. This chapter will focus on Assad's crisis management strategy throughout 2011-2015. This study will follow the crisis framework adopted in the Egypt case study; which divides the chapter into four parts. The first section explores the Syrian government's pre-crisis stage. The second defines the regime's overall policy objectives. The third, analyzes the regime's strategy and assesses whether or not there were policy-strategy matches/mismatches. The final part summarizes the findings and conclusions.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify some important concepts. A coherent strategy refers to the ability of the political leadership to articulate clear and attainable policy goals, commit the necessary resources and means and employ appropriate measures to achieve its goals. Strategy is essentially about the balance of ends and means. Therefore, strategy planning and execution must be grounded in reality; i.e.; political leaders must select their battles carefully and display flexibility in the "fog" and "friction of war".¹ They should recognize when it is necessary to modify their ends and/or means and, most importantly, when to cut losses and explore new paths.

Failure to clearly define the policy objectives, to leverage the instruments of power in pursuit of achieving the stated goals and to coordinate ends and means are all elements of an incoherent or flawed strategy. This failure often results in the squandering of national resources, in perpetuating the conflict, in disillusioning the popular base and in engaging in dangerous cycles of doubling down on tried and failed methods to achieve increasingly unobtainable goals, all of which leave the state weakened, vulnerable and far worse off than before the crisis began.

As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the Assad regime employed strategies on the ground that failed to achieve their intended ends and damaged the long-term prospects for Assad's

¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On war* (London, N. Trübner & Company: 1873)

political survival and perhaps the national survival of the state. An International Crisis Group (ICG) report remarked, “In its attempts at self-preservation, the regime ultimately undermined itself in every conceivable way.”² By escalating the violence into a full-fledged civil war, Assad embarked on a high stakes strategy with highly uncertain outcomes. Even if the Syrian regime were to defeat and disperse its battlefield foes in the ensuing conflict, this would most likely be a Pyrrhic victory. Domestically, Assad would preside over one of the most failed states in the world with the country in ruin, the social fabric destroyed, the economy in shambles, the military frayed from fatigue and stress and with armed groups in control of much of the Syrian territories. Assad will most likely not overcome his crisis of confidence and legitimacy, while his government will struggle to provide basic services to its people, maintain security and monitor the borders. Internationally, Syria will likely remain for many years as a rogue state: embattled, isolated and sanctioned. In essence, the Syrian regime has steered itself into a dead-end with no winners in a devastating civil war, only survivors.

By and large, the Syrian regime used its military power as an end in itself rather than as a means to achieve an obtainable political objective or as leverage in negotiating a politically favorable resolution to the conflict. When the regime won battles on the ground, Assad grew more stubborn and rejected diplomatic initiatives for a political settlement, which in turn contributed to the failure to transform its battlefield victories into political gains. When Assad’s forces suffered a string of military setbacks, the regime engaged in delaying and stalling tactics or in paying lip service to diplomacy in order to regain its momentum and reduce external pressures.³ Assad

² Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution’ *International Crisis Groups*, Report N°108, July 6, 2011, p. 3

³ An international Crisis Group report remarked that “The regime tends to oscillate between two extreme postures: nihilism and triumphalism, the only middle-ground being apathy. When pressure mounts, it promises to fight to the bitter end, vowing to leave nothing behind, sow the seeds of perpetual instability and take the region down with it. When threats subside, it confidently predicts it cannot be defeated, enemies are weak, and there is no reason to

perpetrated an unspeakable brutality in pursuit of beating the populace back into submission. He also made no efforts to win the hearts and minds of Syrians and, hence, precluded prospects for national unity and reconciliation and, closed the door to a genuine political compromise and power sharing arrangements.

Assad's goal to stay in power trumped the objectives of reestablishing governance, reinstating sovereignty and restoring the state. In fact, by unleashing its own *Shabiha* militias, opening its borders for jihadist influx and inviting Iran-backed Shiites zealot mercenaries, Assad and his regime deliberately relinquished the government's monopoly on the use of force. He showed no interest in the long-term consequences of his policies on the future of Syria and, thus, placed his survival over the survival of the nation state. When his regime was on the brink of collapse following four years and a half of a war of attrition, he turned to Russia to keep him in power. However, if history is any guide, there rarely is a favorable outcome when embattled regimes seek foreign military intervention as a way to remain in power. Rather, this form of "invasion by request" erodes even more the legitimacy of the incumbent regime and serves to prolong the conflict.

compromise...officials consistently portray the war as one of protracted attrition. On good days, they exude optimism they ultimately will prevail, albeit at huge cost to regime and country. On bad ones, they appear to accept possible defeat, but at a cost that would make their domestic and foreign enemies' victory pyrrhic. In both instances, they cannot imagine a way for the regime to change its approach: it would be up to others to reverse the course and adapt their stance."

'Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts' *International Crisis Groups*, Middle East Report No. 143, June 27, 2013, p. 20

1. Crisis Planning and Prevention: Intelligence and Contingency Plans

Like other Arab republics, political and socioeconomic maladies in Syria brought popular discontent to a boiling point. Rapacious corruption, predation, the decay of state institutions, police brutality and the suffocation of civil liberties had all reached unprecedented levels. By the end of 2010, the climate had grown so tense in Assad's intelligence state that Syrians mustered the courage to paint anti-regime graffiti on walls, prompting the government to order customers buying spray cans to show a form of ID.⁴

Assad was so confident in his domestic and regional popularity that, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in late January 2011, he supported the protests in other Arab states.⁵ The Syrian regime hailed the uprisings in the region and the fall of Mubarak and Ben Ali as proof of the popular rejection of pro-Western policies and contempt for 'Western lackeys'.⁶ Assad believed that his nationalist foreign policy would immunize him from the Arab Spring domino effect. Also, Syrian officials were quick to publicly stress the uniqueness of Syria in comparison to other countries. In private, Syria's government officials debated between, on the one hand, the strategy of implementing reforms but risk appearing weak and, on the other hand, using overwhelming violence to preempt emerging threats which might also risk escalating the crisis out of control and plunging headlong into the unknown. In an interview with the ICG on February 2011, a senior official admitted that while debate existed within the government, president Bashar had the last say on the government's crisis policy.⁷

⁴ Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution' *International Crisis Groups*, Report N°108, July 6, 2011, p. 12-13

⁵ Jay Solomon and Bill Spindle 'Syria Strongman: Time for Reform' *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011

⁶ 'The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution' *International Crisis Groups*, Report N°108, July 6, 2011, p. 7

⁷ *ibid*, p. 4

By late February 2011, and as the revolutionary wave convulsed the region, the Syrian regime placed its security forces on high alert to prevent any signs of unrest.⁸ At the time, Syrian officials received internal reports that analyzed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and pointed to alarming similarities in the domestic conditions and the popular sense of frustration among the population, which included:

The widespread perception that the state had been hijacked by a small circle of individuals chiefly focused on self-enrichment; the arrogant and unaccountable exercise of power; the absence of any clear sense of collective purpose or direction; growing everyday hardships suffered by a majority of citizens; and the unpredictability of an overeducated, underemployed and bulging youth population.⁹

While the internal reports highlighted popular frustration, the special commission established by Bashar al-Assad in the aftermath of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia concluded that the latter governments collapsed because they did not use sufficient force at the outset.¹⁰ Riad Hijab, who was the governor of Latakia on February 2011, stated, “the government was aware of the need to respond to the people’s demands. However, its assessment of its security institutions was optimistic particularly in regards to their capabilities, due mostly to the fact that the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries had refrained from using force and also given the Syrian president’s popularity.”¹¹ Despite Syria’s enormous intelligence apparatus and vast informers’ network, the regime failed to adequately assess people’s reactions and to formulate policies accordingly. In fact,

⁸ *ibid*, p. 6

⁹ *ibid*, p. 4

¹⁰ Hassan Abbas ‘The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria’ *Arab Reform Brief*, October 2011

¹¹ Bishara, *a Path to Freedom from suffering*, p. 232

intelligence reports were heavily slanted by the apparatus towards the foreign plot narrative from the outset.¹²

It is not clear whether Syria's security services manipulated intelligence reports to justify their preemptive brute violence, or if Assad's conspiracy-laden narrative during his first speech influenced the intelligence conclusions; i.e., a case of politicizing intelligence. Either way, the Syrian regime failed to use the fact-based conclusions that could have been produced by intelligence to assist its political leadership with national security issues, to inform their crisis policy choices and to adequately respond to complex situations. As most Syrians are quick to point out, had Assad addressed local grievances in a timely manner and implemented minimal reforms, he could have averted the crisis. Throughout the crisis, security forces seemed puzzled about how the Syrian people who had been subdued for a long time by coercive institutions had found the courage to break the barrier of fear and defy the state.¹³

The regime also took a number of measures to exude self-confidence and sense of normalcy: the government lifted restrictions on social media and Bashar al-Assad attended public prayer at the Great Umayyad Mosque in central Damascus.¹⁴ The security authorities also summoned a number of opposition figures and threatened them if they participated in protests.¹⁵ In short, while the regime did not expect an uprising to erupt, it confronted the drumbeat leading to the protests with a sense of denial and failed to properly capitalize on its intelligence assets to develop an actionable policy response. As a contingency plan, the regime had premeditated to unleash the military and security forces to their full extent to crush the revolt at the outset.

¹² 'The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide' *International Crisis Group*, Report N°109, July 13, 2011, p. 7, note 63

¹³ Bishara, *a Path to Freedom from suffering*, p. 98

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 229

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 230

When the protests broke out in Deraa, the majority of Syrians hoped their president would implement at least some reforms, punish officials who tortured children and spare Syria the turmoil that gripped other Arab Spring states. This hope led many protesters to focus on specific local demands in the first few months of the crisis before calling for regime change. Instead of making the most of his political capital to contain and minimize the unrest, Assad's hubris and uncompromising repression turned an arguably manageable crisis into a full-blown uprising.¹⁶

2. The Assad Regime Policy-Strategy

Assad's overall political objective had been to remain at the helm past the Syrian uprising and civil war. It is important to recognize that Assad had prioritized his political survival in office above all other considerations, including the regime's long-term interests and the national survival of the state. To that end, Assad pursued two primary policy goals: (1) to defeat the protests (and the insurgency) militarily, and (2) to maintain control over all Syrian territories in order to reassert his presence and bolster his claim of domestic and international political legitimacy.¹⁷ Assad's strategies and battlefield tactics in the 2011-2015 period are so numerous, complex and chaotic that it is beyond the scope of this research to cover them all. For the purpose of testing the research hypothesis, the author will focus only on four of his major strategies: (1) employing overwhelming violence and collective punishment; (2) pursuing an enemy-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign; (3) abetting Jihadism in Syria; and, (4) internationalizing the Syrian conflict.

¹⁶ 'The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution' *International Crisis Groups*, Report N°108, July 6, 2011, p. 1

¹⁷ Christopher Kozak 'An Army in all Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria' *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 26, April 26, 2015, p. 9

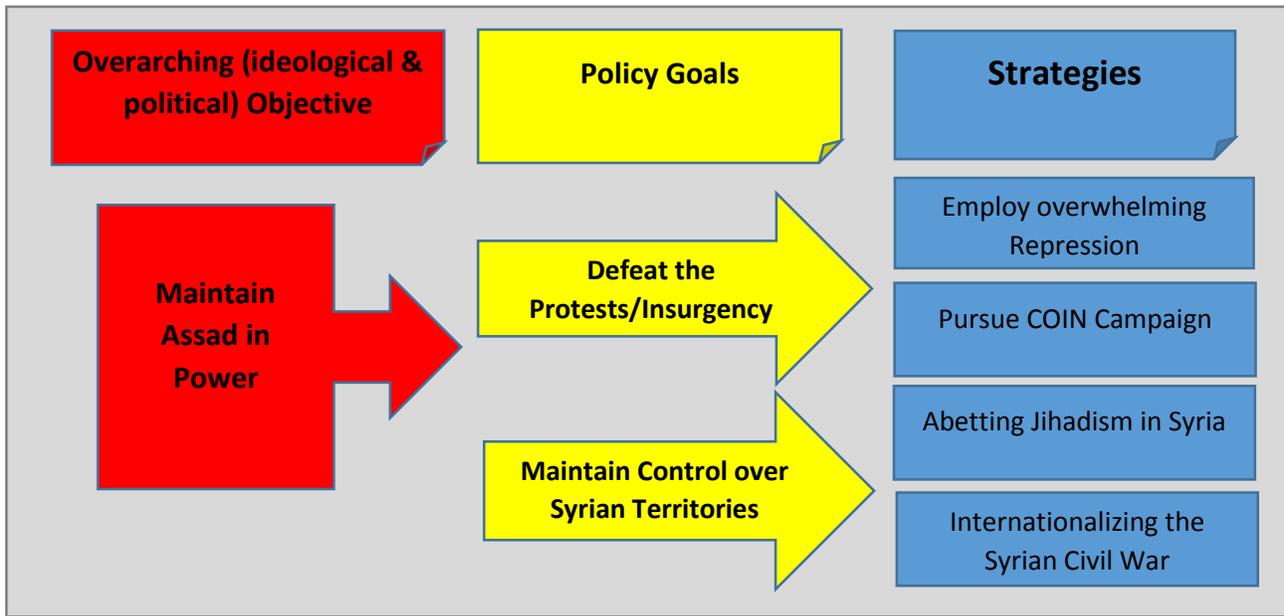


Figure – 16: The Assad Regime Policy-Strategy

3. Policy-Strategy: Implementation and Adaptation

It is important to put the regime’s strategies within context at the outset. First, these strategies were based on Assad’s conviction that his superior military power, his ability to mobilize vast national resources and his solid political constituency would enable him to inflict greater losses on the opposition forces, even in a prolonged war of attrition.¹⁸ Second, the regime’s own experiences helped inform these strategies: Assad had learned that waiting out a domestic or foreign policy crisis paid off since interests, particularly those of the adversaries, often change as circumstances evolve and common interests emerge.¹⁹ David Lesch indicated that this was the conclusion Bashar al-Assad had drawn having stayed the course and waited out the Bush Administration and its belligerent policies.²⁰ Bente Scheller argued that Assad adopted a similar

¹⁸ Jeffrey White ‘The Crisis of the Assad Regime’ *The Washington Institute*, May 28, 2015

¹⁹ Bente Scheller ‘Putin and Assad: the Players of Damascus’ *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, November 09, 2015

²⁰ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 26

approach to the Syrian civil war by playing a waiting game and dragging out the conflict to debilitate his enemies and create conditions on the ground that would ultimately shift the interests of international players, while improving both the regime's bargaining position and its staying power.²¹ In fact, many regional and world powers, which had called for Assad's departure in 2011, had softened their stance towards the Syrian regime by 2015 due to the rise of the self-described Islamic State (IS) and the serious threat it posed to international security.²²

Having identified the Syrian regime's policy goals and politico-military strategy, the discussion below examines whether or not Assad pursued a coherent policy-strategy: Were the policy goals obtainable? Did the strategies employed fit and accomplished the desired policy objectives? Did Assad reassess, coordinate and adapt ends and means as he confronted ugly surprises in the battlefield?

3.1 Employing Overwhelming Violence and Collective Punishment to Quell the Uprising

Assad decided to employ brute force to end the protest movement and stop its spread nationwide. Initially, this strategy prevented protesters who sought to replicate the uprising at Tahrir Square in Egypt from occupying public squares. It also preempted attempts to establish safe havens where protesters could receive support and supplies, as was the case in Benghazi. The regime adopted a strategy of gradual escalation of repression since the breakout of the uprising, moving from one level to the next as they failed to accomplish their goals. By April 2011, Assad's forces employed indiscriminate killings and instituted systematic detention and torture on an

²¹ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy under the Assads* (London: Hurts, 2013)

²² See for example: Nathan Hodge and Jay Solomon 'Kerry Softens Position on Syrian President Assad' *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2015

industrial scale by turning schools and stadiums into makeshift prisons. Two months into the uprising, the regime mobilized the military and surrounded restive towns, cut off basic services and imposed sieges onto vulnerable populations. When the conflict turned into a full-fledged civil war at the start of 2012, Assad resorted to air strikes and aerial bombardments using attack helicopters, ballistic missiles and crude barrel bombs. The regime's forces also engaged in the practice of house demolition, property theft and sexual violence.²³ By end of 2013, Assad's forces had committed dozens of sectarian massacres to displace populations as a means to effect sectarian cleansing and forceful demographic change.²⁴ In addition, the Assad regime had no moral qualms in using starvation, denying humanitarian relief and employing chemical weapons against civilians.²⁵ By 2014, the regime's savage repression had evolved into a scorched earth policy of flattening neighborhoods, shooting livestock and burning crops.²⁶

The use of overwhelming repression to preempt protests from spreading nationwide was a flawed strategy for several reasons. First, uncompromising violence may have succeeded three decades ago when Assad senior brutally crushed a popular movement-turned Islamist-led insurgency, but it was the wrong approach in the highly globalized, digitized and interconnected age and new technologies (satellite TV, social media, etc.) of individual empowerment. The Syrian regime failed to realize that in the long run, it would lose the battle to control access to information, to dominate political discourse or to stem the revolutionary tide of the Arab Spring. The result was that the strategy of killing and intimidating people into submission neither quelled the protests nor

²³ 4th Report of Commission of Inquiry, *UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/22/59*, February 5, 2013, para. 106, 108; 5th Report, para. 91

²⁴ Elizabeth Ferris, Kemal Kirişçi and Salman Shaikh 'Syrian Crisis: Massive Displacement, Dire Needs and a Shortage of Solutions' *The Brookings Institutions*, September 18, 2013, p. 11

²⁵ See for example: 'World Report 2015: Syria, Events of 2014' *Human Rights Watch*, January 2015

²⁶ See for example: 'Syria accused of war crimes by Amnesty International' *BBC News*, June 12, 2012; Stephen Kalin and Ryan Lucas 'Syria under attack over its scorched earth policy' *The Scotsman*, January 31, 2014.

reduced popular participation. Instead, many Syrians sympathized with the plight of Deraa while adopting their demands as their own and, most importantly, the funerals of fallen protesters became rallying points for further demonstrations. When Assad's forces tortured 13-year old Hamza al-Khateeb to death in an attempt to deter families from participating in the protests, the move backfired. Instead, it gave the uprising a martyr with whom all Syrians could identify and showed the ugly side of the regime even to those who had wanted to look the other way, thereby further galvanizing public anger and shocking many fence sitters into participating in the revolt. The regime's obsession to quash the uprising swiftly and at all costs blinded the Syrian policymakers to the long-term ramifications of their strategy. A regime that had ruled for decades through fear and repression had the dogmatic belief that violence was the only antidote to dissent. Assad clung to this tenet even when his excessive cruelty exacerbated the crisis, created more domestic enemies and made his regime less secure.

Second, the regime's sweeping arrest and torture campaigns in makeshift prisons ignored a critical psychological dimension. Instead of deterring people from joining the protests, the horrific and degrading experiences in detention centers stiffened the resolve of most activists who returned to the streets in retaliation to Assad's brutality.²⁷ By exploiting the full coercive capacity of the state, the "left hand frequently not knowing what the right was doing, a protester could be arrested and tortured, only to be arrested and tortured all over again by a security branch that did not know the military, police or some other branch of intelligence had already done the job."²⁸ A Syrian military forensic photographer code-named Caesar smuggled shocking evidence documenting how Assad turned his hospitals into mass slaughterhouses for tens of thousands of

²⁷ 'The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide' *International Crisis Group*, Report N°109, July 13, 2011, p. 7, note 65

²⁸ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, p. 104

protesters.²⁹ Revenge is one of the most powerful motivations to fight and the more the regime repressed, the more it swelled the enemy ranks.³⁰ In addition, protesters were convinced that if Assad pulled through this crisis, his regime would go on a nationwide rampage of revenge against those who rose to topple his government. Syrians recall the fate of tens of thousands to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and torture after Hafiz al-Assad had crushed the uprising in 1982.³¹ Therefore, given the regime's zero-sum violent approach, protesters found their backs against the wall and had to fight to the bitter end. Therefore, Assad squandered opportunities to turn the crisis around, win the hearts and minds of his populace and deescalate the conflict.

Third, the Syrian leadership offered a number of reforms during the crisis. However, his strategy of combining concessions with savage repression was a flawed approach at best. The contradiction between the promises of reforms and the security forces' practices on the streets undermined the regime's credibility, dispelled the perception that Assad was a reformer and that he would rein in the security forces.³² These measures rendered his concessions meaningless and convinced people that there would be no fundamental policy changes as long as Assad was still in power.³³ Most importantly, the regime's schizophrenic behavior alienated and burned vital bridges with Turkey and the Arab League. Had Assad ceased his brutal measures, these key regional actors were willing to provide a viable political exit from the crisis by lending regional and international legitimacy to Assad's minimal political concessions.

²⁹ Adam Ciralsky 'Documenting Evil: Inside Assad's Hospitals of Horror' *Vanity Fair*, June 11, 2015

³⁰ See for example Sung Hee Kim 'The Role of Vengeance in Conflict Escalation' in *Escalation and Negotiation in International Conflict*, I. William Zartman and Guy Olivier Faure (eds.), 141-162 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

³¹ Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

³² 'The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide' *International Crisis Group*, Report N°109, July 13, 2011, p. 13-14

³³ *ibid*, p. 1

These minor reforms would have brought Syria's highly authoritarian regime down to something resembling Mubarak's Egypt with "a legalized yet tame opposition; slightly more competitive elections; a measure of freedom of speech in the media; marginally improved security services; enduring high-level corruption and persistent family rule."³⁴ Therefore, the uncompromising repression squandered a significant number of opportunities where the Syrian regime could have achieved its policy goals through a negotiated political settlement while at the height of its strength and during the first few months of the uprising. The repression also doomed all peace initiatives to failure, which included the regime's national dialogue (June 2011), the Arab League-led peace plan (September 2011), the UN-Arab League's mediation efforts led by Kofi Annan (March-August, 2012), Lakhdar Brahimi (August 2012 to May 2014) and the most recent Geneva talks (February 2016), in which opposition forces rejected negotiations given Assad's relentless campaign of bombing and starving civilians.³⁵

Fourth, Assad's extraordinary repression ultimately led protesters to take up arms to defend themselves thus transforming a peaceful, indigenous and popular pro-democracy movement into a violent insurgency infiltrated by foreign jihadists. State-led terror only exacerbated an already dire situation mired in political exclusion, economic deprivation and collective grievances. This volatile mix had alienated much of the civilian population who then provided popular support and physical sanctuary to protesters-turned-rebels. An uprising-turned-insurgency challenged the political legitimacy of the Syrian regime by seeking to create a political space from which it could project competing authority and power. The excessive use of force has ultimately thrust the regime into an open-ended, unlimited and highly risky people's war. Bishara argued that the Assad regime

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 17

³⁵ 'Syria conflict: UN suspends peace talks in Geneva' *BBC News*, February 3, 2016

placed itself “at war with society... and the state lost its moral and political standing among most Syrians...the regime was soon after regarded as an ‘occupying power’ against whom Syrians had to defend themselves.”³⁶ A government official remarked, “the regime had been betting that bloodshed would subdue society. But society can withstand more bloodshed than the regime. It is increasingly losing support and will end up with none.”³⁷

In conclusion, the strategy of escalating repression and collective punishment has served mainly to unleash a popular rush for vengeance, fuel the revolutionary fervor and deepen the crisis of contentious collective action. Instead of quelling the uprising, state violence raised the stakes and provoked a counter-escalation as more people decided to participate in the revolt, thus transforming a local incident from the remote rural town of Deraa into a nationwide movement that gained self-sustaining momentum and, hence undermined the government’s ability to control the crisis. The extraordinary brutality left the Syrian regime less secure, less in control of events on the ground and increasingly unable to achieve its policy goal. Instead of reassessing the government’s strategy and exploring a new path of conflict resolution, Assad continued his violent clampdown, violated the laws of war and redlines that govern the relationship between state and society. He crossed a point of no return in the conflict’s dynamics, plunging Syria into a deadly spiral of violence and counter violence with no end in sight.

³⁶ Bishara, *Syria: a Path to Freedom from Suffering*, p. 189, 190, 191

³⁷ ‘The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide’ *International Crisis Group*, Report N°109, July 13, 2011, p. 11

3.2 Enemy-Centric Counterinsurgency (COIN) Strategy

By early 2012, the uprising had morphed into a full-fledged insurgency. The Syrian regime pursued a Counter-Insurgency (COIN) campaign to clear insurgents, regain control over rebel-held areas and restore order. Unlike the Western COIN doctrine that focuses on protecting civilians, minimizing collateral damage and winning the hearts and minds of populations,³⁸ Syria's COIN strategy "was informed by the previous experience of the Assad regime in suppressing the 1977-1982 Muslim Brotherhood rebellion and by Soviet/Russian doctrine developed during the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan and Russia's two wars in Chechnya."³⁹ These strategies were characterized by the use of ruthless terror and a scorch-earth policy to uproot insurgents.⁴⁰ Joseph Holliday, a research analyst at the institute for the study of war, indicated that the Syrian regime prosecuted its counterinsurgency by relying on three major approaches: Selective deployment of forces, mobilizing paramilitaries to supplement the armed forces and conducting clear-and-hold operations.⁴¹

First, the Syrian regime primarily relied on loyal and largely Alawite forces to carry out orders on the battlefield. Assad was able to take some units out of their doctrinal formations by combining conventional units (mostly Sunnis) with the most trustworthy elite forces (mostly Alawites). Nevertheless, this strategy of deploying politically reliable units to limit the risk of

³⁸ According to the U.S. Government counterinsurgency Guide (2009), an effective counter insurgency strategies "integrate and synchronize political, security, economic, and informational components that reinforce governmental legitimacy and effectiveness while reducing insurgent influence over the population. COIN strategies should be designed to simultaneously protect the population from insurgent violence; strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of government institutions to govern responsibly and marginalize insurgents politically, socially, and economically." *U.S. Government Counter Insurgency Guide* (2009), p. 12

³⁹ Brian Jenkins 'The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War' *RAND Corporation*, 2014, p. 12

⁴⁰ See for example: Tomáš Šmíd and Miroslav Mareš 'Kadyrovtsy': Russia's Counterinsurgency Strategy and the Wars of Paramilitary Clans' *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (January 2015): 650–677

⁴¹ Joseph Holliday 'The Assad Regime: from Counterinsurgency to Civil War' *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 8, March 2013, p. 12-17

defections forced Assad to employ only about one-third of the Syrian army's combat power. As a result, the regime did not have sufficient troops to conduct a troop-intensive counterinsurgency campaign across the country.⁴² Assad forces were stretched thin and could not maintain adequate troop presence and prevent the resurgence of rebels after clearing opposition strongholds; they were thus forced to engage in debilitating whack a mole operations so much so that "troops invaded, occupied, and then retreated from Deraa at least twenty times in less than fifteen months."⁴³ By summer 2012, the Assad regime had effectively lost its counterinsurgency strategy as rebels consolidated their territorial control and consistently prevented regime advances.⁴⁴

Second, to compensate for the shortage of troops, the Syrian regime mobilized two paramilitary groups: the mafia-like *Shabiha* who were primarily led by al-Assad's family and the Baath-affiliated popular organizations, also called the Popular Committees or People's Army.⁴⁵ The latter drew its ranks from minority communities and was organized during the 1980s following the Islamist-led insurgency. Because of their fierce loyalty to the Alawite regime, both paramilitaries assumed a leading role in the government's COIN campaign. However, these civilian fighters and paramilitary forces, who are generally less trained and disciplined than conscripts, violated the laws of war by committing appalling crimes that hardened sectarian enmities. In fact, these "atrocities strengthen[ed] the sectarian narrative held by Salafi-jihadist groups operating in Syria and provide[d] a constant stream of recruits vulnerable to radicalization."⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid, p.15

⁴³ Sadik Al Azm 'Syria in Revolt: Understanding the Unthinkable War' *Boston Review*, August 18, 2014

⁴⁴ Joseph Holliday 'The Assad Regime: from Counterinsurgency to Civil War' p. 9

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.16

⁴⁶ Christopher Kozak 'An Army in all Corners' p. 5

The paramilitaries' decentralized structure, rampant criminality and war profiteering also contradicted the narrative that the state was regaining control and providing security.⁴⁷ Despite having mobilized the paramilitaries, Assad could not generate enough manpower to regain control of all rebel-held areas. By fall 2012, the regime abandoned its pursuit of reclaiming all the Syrian territories and instead withdrew and concentrated its forces in provincial capitals and Alawite strongholds. These measures left the countryside open for the rebels to retrench and established a secure base for training and launching operations.⁴⁸

Third, Assad's forces initially succeeded in their clear-and-hold operations but as the insurgency mushroomed nationwide, the regime could not muster sufficient troops for a country-wide campaign.⁴⁹ By mid-2012, and unable to conduct clearance operations, the regime switched to a strategy of "deliberate population displacement, using artillery shelling, air strikes, massacres, and even ballistic missile strikes in opposition-controlled areas. Assad thus transformed what had been a clear-and-hold counterinsurgency strategy into a form of ethnic cleansing."⁵⁰ The strategy of depopulating rebel-held towns to separate rebels from the population through scorch earth tactics backfired. When refugees arrived in the suburbs of government-controlled neighborhoods, their plight animated the insurgency and hence served to spread the unrest further.⁵¹ While Assad's air bombardment campaign had turned the population against the insurgency in some areas including Aleppo, it failed to endear the regime to the mobilized populace.⁵²

⁴⁷ 'Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts' *International Crisis Groups*, Middle East Report No. 143, June 27, 2013, p. 30

⁴⁸ Joseph Holliday 'The Assad Regime: from Counterinsurgency to Civil War' p. 19

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 16

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 19

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 20

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 23

At the most fundamental level, the Syrian regime did not prosecute the COIN strategy most suited to the times and the context in which the insurgency emerged. This was a Twenty First Century popular uprising-turned-insurgency following a regional revolutionary wave; it was the product of deep and longstanding socio-political grievances and thus protesters-turned rebels enjoyed sanctuary among the populace and engaged in fourth generation asymmetric warfare. Specifically, Assad did not pursue a population-centric COIN designed to win over the population and regain the government's legitimacy by providing a safe and secure environment for locals, reinforcing the rule of law, taking measures to regain the loyalty and support of the masses, addressing the root causes of the rebellion and depriving the insurgents of their ideological, political and economic influence. Instead, the regime prosecuted a classic enemy-centric counterinsurgency by employing savage repression and scorch-earth measures that accelerated Syria's sectarian atomization, exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and created more anger and resentment among the population.⁵³

In Mao's proverbial "fish in the sea" analogy to hunt down the insurgent 'fish', the Syrian regime pummeled the civilian 'sea'. The regime's extraordinary brutality became a virtual factory for the opposition by turning the relatives of victims and refugees into permanent enemies. The regime's strategy of overtaking rebel-controlled areas became akin to the task of pushing aside a puddle of water; i.e., when government forces waned, retreated or faltered, the rebels immediately flowed back to the area. These dynamics continue to the present day. Assad's forces committed

⁵³ Joseph Holliday 'The Assad Regime: from Counterinsurgency to Civil War' p. 41

In a recent study by the RAND think tank, a comparison of 71 insurgencies since WWII had concluded that "the "iron fist" COIN path, focused primarily on eliminating the insurgent threat, is historically less successful. A motive-based path (one that focuses on eliminating the incentives to support or participate in an insurgency) has been much more successful" and that "the COIN concept "crush them" proved to be more strongly correlated with a government loss than with a win." Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill and Molly Dunigan 'Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern insurgencies' RAND Corporation, 2013.

Accessed on February 13, 2016. Available from: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR291z1.html

horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity and did little to endear themselves to the population. Nor did they behave as a government interested in creating conditions conducive to deescalating the conflict by regaining its monopoly on the use of force, attempting to recover its image, fostering national unity, re-establishing the social contract, rebuilding its legitimacy and re-stabilizing the nation state. Scheller argues, “looking at the patterns of destruction, the indiscriminate and deliberate violence against civilians, as well as the targeting of infrastructures, it seems that despite vehemently clinging to power, Bashar al-Assad has given up on the idea of governing.”⁵⁴

In conclusion, the Syrian regime failed to pursue the strategies most appropriate for the achievement of its policy objectives. An enemy-centric COIN enabled rebels to sustain extensive support among the local population: rebels had a secure sanctuary, established strongholds, embedded within the civilian population, defended against the regime’s indiscriminate attacks, projected power across many parts of the country and, most importantly, fought asymmetrically thus bypassing Assad’s conventional military might. By selective deployment, Assad failed to commit the necessary resources to prosecute troop-intensive counterinsurgency across the country. The use of paramilitaries intensified sectarian hatreds and alienated the local population. With the ruthless measures he employed, Assad never presented his government as a credible and viable alternative to the insurgency. He neither anticipated nor reevaluated and modified his policy-strategies as conditions on the ground changed dramatically. His single-minded pursuit to crush the uprising with all repressive means at his disposal eclipsed Syria’s policymakers from the long-

⁵⁴ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game*, p. 1

term implications of his strategies on the ground. Ultimately, a long war of attrition decimated the regime's small and trustworthy elite units, forcing Assad to rely on foreign fighters.

3.3 Abetting Jihadism in Syria

Part of Assad's strategy was to "set the scene for the rise of the very terrorists he would later argue were the very reason he should remain in power."⁵⁵ On late May 2011, Assad declared a general amnesty as part of his policy concessions. The amnesty was a ruse: the regime kept the pro-democracy protesters locked in jail and released thousands of Salafist-Jihadists whom the Syrian regime used to send to Iraq to fight American soldiers.⁵⁶ Mohamed Habbash, a former Syrian Member of Parliament who headed the de-radicalization program at Sednaya Prison stated, "in the first few months of the uprising, the regime deliberately released jihadists from Sednaya Prison so that they would clash with the secular protesters, split the ranks of the uprising and ultimately help portray the popular mobilization as nothing more than a violent Islamist insurgency".⁵⁷ He also stated, "the regime drove Salafists and Sufis to violence. Ideology was part of the reason, but let me tell you: if Gandhi spent three months in Syria [prisons], he would be a jihadi extremist."⁵⁸

The security services went beyond these measures. Saleem Hadithi, a former military intelligence officer claimed that at the beginning of the uprising, he witnessed in the Air Force Intelligence Branch "security personnel disguised in Afghan outfits and long beards...and were

⁵⁵ Hayes Brown 'The History of ISIS that Assad Hopes Everyone Has Forgotten' *Think Progress*, September 15, 2014.

⁵⁶ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015): p. 145

⁵⁷ Mohamed Habbash. Interview, in "Political Memory" program, part 1. *Al Arabiya Channel*. Cairo, Egypt. November 16, 2013 (Arabic)

⁵⁸ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, p. 145

tasked to terrorize civilians and stigmatize the uprising as one led by terrorists.”⁵⁹ Another military intelligence veteran claimed that “the regime did not just open the door to the prisons and let these extremists out, but it facilitated their work, their creation of armed brigades.”⁶⁰ Charles Lister, author of the critically acclaimed *The Syrian Jihad: al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, argued that

From the very first days of the revolution, Assad and his intelligence apparatus have consistently facilitated the rise of jihadists. This policy of aiding and abetting jihadist militants and manipulating them for Damascus’ policy interests is a well-established Assad family practice, dating back at least to the 1990s.⁶¹

With this strategy, Assad sought to promote the narrative that he had been fighting terrorists all along, to present himself as an indispensable partner on the war against transnational terrorism and that his regime, despite its flaws, was the lesser of two evils and the only obstacle to Syria turning into another Somalia. Given the global media’s obsession with ISIS’ brutality (which pales in comparison to the industrial scale atrocities committed by the regime) the Syrian regime partly succeeded in presenting the Syria crisis outcomes in dichotomous terms, i.e., Assad vs. the apocalyptic self-described the Islamic State.⁶² However, it is still quite baffling that the Syrian regime saw a causal policy link between its aiding the proliferation of jihadi groups, which increased the enemy’s ranks with battle-hardened ideological militants, and the goal of defeating the insurgency. Assad seems to have never considered the implications of such high-risk gamble.

⁵⁹ Saleem Hadithi. Interview, in “Guest of Mashriq” program, *Orient TV*, February 19, 2013 (Arabic)

⁶⁰ Phil Sands, Justin Vela and Suha Maayeh ‘Assad Regime Set Free Extremists from Prison to Fire up Trouble during Peaceful Uprising’ *The National*, January 21, 2014.

⁶¹ Charles Lister ‘Viewpoint: West ‘walking into abyss on Syria’ *BBC News*, September 28, 2015.

⁶² See for example: Ryan Crocker ‘Assad is the Least Worst Option in Syria’ *The New York Times*, December 21, 2013; Youssef Badawi ‘Should the US work with Assad to fight ISIS?’ *The New York Times*, August 22, 2014; Elias Groll ‘Assad is America’s Strange Bedfellow and the Price is 190,000 dead’ *Foreign Policy*, August 22, 2014; Max Abrahams ‘The US should help Assad to fight ISIS, the Greater Evil’ *The New York Times*, August 22, 2014

The regime's strategy of abetting jihadism on the onset of the uprising in 2011 explains to a great extent the chaotic situation in Syria today. First, the jihadi movement drew an unprecedented number of religiously motivated fighters and led the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq (self-described as the Islamic State in Iraq, ISI) to take root in Syria and declare the establishment of the so-called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State (IS), one of the most powerful transnational insurgencies in the history of the modern Middle East. With the proliferation of hundreds of armed groups fighting a war of attrition, Assad lost significant territory, troops and materiel in a string of battlefield defeats. To neutralize the threat of the dominant armed group, Assad committed yet another strategy blunder: In early 2014, he established a temporary truce with ISIS, traded with it after Syria's oil and gas fields became under its control and both focused their combat operations on destroying the Free Syrian Army.⁶³ Lister argued that by "adopting a deliberate policy of not targeting IS, Assad directly facilitated that group's recovery and its explosion into the transnational "Caliphate" movement it claims to be today."⁶⁴

Second, and as a result of the regime's flawed strategy, advancing ISIS rebels disillusioned many pro-regime minority communities who began to form militias and man checkpoints to defend their neighborhoods instead of sending their young men to join the collapsing Syrian army.⁶⁵ This led to a rise in military desertion and draft dodging, which deepened both the regime's manpower crisis and its dependence on foreign fighters for its survival.⁶⁶ By August 2015, the rapid advance of rebels near the regime's Alawite heartland in the eastern edge of the mountains had forced

⁶³ Hassan Hassan 'Assad Has Never Fought ISIS' *The New York Times*, September 18, 2015; Yousef Selman 'ISIS and Assad cooperate locally on mutual interests to destroy FSA' *Daily Sabah*, June 28, 2015

⁶⁴ Charles Lister 'Viewpoint: West 'walking into abyss on Syria' *BBC News*, September 28, 2015.

⁶⁵ See for example Hugh Naylor 'In new sign of Assad's troubles, Syria Druze turn away from president' *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2015

⁶⁶ 'Syria's Assad admits army struggling for manpower' *Aljazeera News*, July 26, 2015

Assad's regime to retreat from key regions and redeploy its forces in order to fortify its defense lines and avoid catastrophic losses.⁶⁷

Third, Assad failed to consider the long-term detrimental impact of his strategy on Syria's stability and the need to regain his monopoly on the use of force. In other words, if the regime was to strike a favorable political settlement with the opposition forces, it would likely be engaged for many years to come in very costly and debilitating tasks of rehabilitating, disarming or dislodging hundreds of local and foreign armed groups and terrorist organizations, many of whom the regime itself had originally helped establish in Syria.

In conclusion, Assad's strategy of abetting jihadism in Syria in the quest to tarnish the protest movement as terrorism, to justify the government's brutal clampdown and to create the illusion of a common cause with the global fight against terrorism was short-sighted at best. The Syrian regime failed to weigh in the ramifications and long-term consequences of its measures, thereby compounding the frictions of war. Ultimately, aiding the proliferation of jihadi movements created a Frankenstein-style monster that posed an existential threat to the Syrian regime: it dragged the conflict on, pummeled Assad's forces and left the regime more vulnerable and less capable of delivering a decisive defeat against the swelling insurgency. When ISIS set up shop in Syria, it injected the insurgency with a transnational ideological cause that guaranteed a steady stream of recruits specifically from the persecution of Sunnis at the hands of brutal Shiite governments in both Baghdad and Damascus. Assad continued the recurring self-destructive pattern of focusing on immediate battles rather than thinking beyond the immediate situation and

⁶⁷ Tom Perry 'To avoid losses, Syrian army retreats in key region: army source' *Reuters*, August 12, 2015

calculating ahead beyond the fourth and fifth battles, assessing the potential consequences of his tactics and continually subordinating his strategies on the ground to his desired policy objectives.

3.4 Internationalizing the Syrian Civil War

In a last ditch attempt to cling to power, Assad decided to internationalize the civil war by placing the conflict in Syria squarely within the context of world power rivalry and the global ideological divide; i.e., Western democracies vs. the “axis of authoritarianism”. The latter grouping of states emerged with the rise of president Putin in Russia and includes China, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela. Fear of the West’s destabilizing democratizing agenda, particularly in the aftermath of the color revolutions of Eastern Europe and the 2011 Arab Spring, propelled this constellation of powers to coordinate their foreign policies, challenge Western norms of humanitarian interventions, promote their absolutist conception of state sovereignty and shape international politics in their favor.⁶⁸ Steven Heydemann, a specialist on Syria affairs and dictatorships argued,

[t]he Syrian conflict has become a testing ground for techniques of authoritarian stabilization—the coordinated efforts of an interconnected network of authoritarian governments to prop up a like-minded regime threatened by a popular insurgency. Syria today stands out as a case of how developed global authoritarian networks have become. It sheds important light on the growing capacity of authoritarian actors to mobilize for the collective defense of regimes that are seen as central to the stability of such networks...The Syrian case thus highlights the deepening cooperation among the Assad regime’s authoritarian allies, which now includes joint combat operations, intelligence sharing, and more tightly-linked diplomatic efforts.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See for example Bill C. Martel ‘Grand Strategy of the Authoritarian Axis: How will the West Respond’ *The Diplomat*, June 24, 2012; Bill C. Martel ‘An Authoritarian Axis Rising?’ *The Diplomat*, June 29, 2012

⁶⁹ Steven Hrydemann ‘Assad’s Lifeline: The Authoritarian Stabilization Pact in Syria’ *Resurgent Dictatorship*, November 10, 2015

By internationalizing the conflict, Assad sought to secure the strategic commitment and support of foreign backers (mainly Iran and Russia) and non-state actors (Hezbollah and Shiites mercenaries) and, also to preclude decisive actions by the UN Security Council.⁷⁰ Assad also calculated correctly that the Obama Administration would not use force against Syria and get entangled in yet another Middle Eastern quagmire particularly in a conflict that has morphed into a complex and metastasizing regional war by proxy.

This strategy, however, was counterproductive to the regime's policy goals. First, while Assad secured the support of allies, he increasingly relied on them for political survival, particularly Iran to such a degree that what started as bilateral relations "drifted into a relationship of subservience on the part of the Bashar al-Assad regime."⁷¹ This strategy led Tehran to increase its influence on the ground, command military operations in the battlefield, "treat Syria like a colony" and establish "a state within a state" allegedly forcing Assad to turn to Russia for help.⁷²

Second, and relatedly, Tehran and Moscow increased their involvement in Syria at the expense of Assad's decisional autonomy. As discussed in chapter 12, the regime's international allies, which were pursuing their parochial strategic interests in the Syria conflict, gained influence over Assad's political and military choices and, therefore, weakened Assad's ability to coordinate his policy and strategy. Therefore, Assad's fate and the outcome of the Syrian civil war became intertwined with factors beyond the regime's immediate control. In fact, Assad's future could very well be decided in Geneva, by world and regional powers with divergent interests, rather than in Damascus. While Assad started the war, his strategy of externalizing the conflict was self-

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 165

⁷² Christoph Reuter 'The Iranian Project: Why Assad Has Turned to Moscow for Help' *Spiegel*, October 6, 2015

defeating: he undercut his ability to control developments on the ground and ultimately to dictate the outcomes of the war.

Third, involving outside powers brought regional foes into the conflict, many of whom had been adept in the art of sending young men to Jihad abroad. Assad's strategy ultimately attracted tens of thousands of diehard self-described jihadists who were looking for a cause to fight for and were committed to either victory or martyrdom thus turning Syria into Afghanistan redux: pitting the forces of political Islam against a 'heretical regime'. In addition, and as many analysts have argued, the Syrian internationalized civil war exacerbated the regional struggle between status quo states (led by Saudi Arabia) and a revisionist and expansionist Iran whose influence has grown so significantly that by 2014 Iranian officials were claiming that they had control over four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa).⁷³

There is a prevailing perception in the Middle East that the new regional balance of power will be set in Syria; i.e., whoever achieves victory in Syria will likely claim dominant status.⁷⁴ This does not bode well for Assad in a war of attrition. In terms of population size, financial prowess and military hardware, Sunni powers have greater capacity to endure and support their proxies in Syria than their Shiite counterparts. Simply put, while Assad's strategy saved him in the short run, it will likely bleed his regime white in the long run.

A large body of empirical literature on conflict studies finds that internationalized civil wars tend to be more brutal, more intractable, last longer and are also less likely to conclude in a

⁷³ See for example: 'Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution' *Middle East Monitor*, September 27, 2014

⁷⁴ See for example: George Friedman 'The Middle Eastern Balance of Power Matures' *Stratfor*, March 31, 2015

decisive military victory than non-internationalized internal wars.⁷⁵ In zero-sum struggles, external support motivates internal combatants to continue the fight rather than settle or concede to far less optimum outcome. In addition, states that intervene in an intrastate conflict often pursue different goals than the internal parties to the conflict do and, most importantly, because these external actors bear lower costs of fighting, they have less incentives to settle the conflict through negotiations.⁷⁶

In conclusion, by internationalizing the conflict, Assad exploited geopolitical fault lines to gain a critical lifeline that would enable his regime to endure a devastating civil war and prevent UN-mandated humanitarian intervention. However, external support has helped the Syrian regime survive but not prevail; instead it has deepened Assad's dependence on foreign backers and precipitated a ruinous stalemate. In addition, Assad injected further instability, complexity and uncertainty into the Syrian crisis by giving regional rival powers a major role in shaping the conflict to their advantage, i.e. allowing an influx of their constituency into Syria and thereby sharpening the sectarian divides and accelerating the centrifugal forces of extremism, warlordism, and jihadism. By drawing multiple competing state and non-state actors into the conflict, the Syrian regime had to fight on several fronts, stretched its resources and exhaust its troops almost to a breaking point. Assad operated in a limited view of the present and thus failed to formulate

⁷⁵ See for example: Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew Enterline 'Killing Time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820-1992' *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 615-642 (December, 2000); Patrick Regan 'Third Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate conflicts' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 55-73 (February, 2002); Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Kyle Beardsley 'Nosy Neighbors: Third Party Actors in Central American Conflicts' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 379-402 (June, 2004); Idean Salehyan 'Transnational Rebels: Neighboring States as Sanctuary for Rebel Groups' *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 2, pp. 217-242 (January, 2007)

⁷⁶ David Cunningham 'Blocking Resolution: How external States Can Prolong Civil Wars' *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (March 2010): 115-127

forward-looking strategies designed to improve the prospects of defeating the insurgency, restoring order and/or settling the conflict peacefully.

4. Policy-Strategy Mismatch: The Absence of Strategic Vision

The analysis presented above indicates that Assad lacked a strategic vision that lays out a clear and realistic end to the conflict. His regime failed to adequately assess its resources and capabilities and to use the appropriate means to implement its policy objectives. The gap between regime policy and politico-military strategy continued to widen with devastating consequences for the national survival of the state. Assad largely focused on an operational level rather than on a strategic level, i.e., he focused on immediate and near battles as he stumbled from one setback to another. International Crisis Group remarked that at the beginning of the crisis and for many months thereafter “the regime acted as if each and every disturbance was an isolated case requiring a pin-point reaction, rather than part of a national crisis that would only deepen short of radical change.”⁷⁷ Even throughout the civil war period, the “regime undermine[d] with one hand the relative success achieved with the other.”⁷⁸ The Syrian leadership neither evaluated its ends-means match nor subordinated the strategies on the ground to its policy goals. Bente Scheller, who wrote a book on Assad’s strategy since 2011, remarked: “There has never been any visible political strategy for finding a solution, no dialogue, no mediation.”⁷⁹

The Syrian political leadership had an unrealistic vision of the conflict’s outcomes. In an interview with the French newspaper *Paris Match* on December 2014, Assad admitted that “it is

⁷⁷ ‘The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution’ *International Crisis Groups*, p. i

⁷⁸ ‘Syria’s Metastasizing Conflicts’ *International Crisis Groups*, p. 30

⁷⁹ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game*, p. 32

not an easy war from a military perspective...no one can say how this war will end or when.”⁸⁰ He also seemed determined to continue the fight regardless of the consequences: when the UN peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi told Bashar that he could not stay in power because the price would likely be the destruction of Damascus, Assad reportedly shot back “I can win the war [even] if Damascus is destroyed.”⁸¹ Worse, Assad tended to view his adversaries as abstractions and embarked on a war against an enemy with no defined center of gravity. In a televised speech on August 2014, Assad declared:

As a matter of fact, we are confronting tens of thousands of terrorists, particularly Syrian terrorists, the sons and daughters of this country...this means there is a social support for these Syrian terrorists: there is a family, a relative, a neighbor, a friend and others who know and support these terrorists. So we are talking about hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of Syrians who are terrorists or supporting terrorism...This means we are witnessing a moral failure, social failure and therefore failure at the national level.⁸²

Even Syria’s vice-president Farouq al-Sharaa, whom Assad had sidelined from the decision making process, admitted in a rare interview, that from a strategic point of view, the regime had no clear idea of the direction they were taking:

With every passing day, the solution gets further away, militarily and politically...From my perspective, I am not completely certain where the current option will take us. I do not have a transparent answer. Officials might not even know where we have reached in the solution... You might be surprised if I tell you that even the president himself might not be able to provide you with a satisfactory answer, although he has all the power in the country in his hands... If anyone has the chance to meet Mister President, he would hear from him that this is a long struggle, a big conspiracy with many actors (terrorists, rabble, smugglers). He does

⁸⁰ ‘Our Full Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’ *Paris Match*, December 3, 2014

⁸¹Abdul Rahman Al Rashed ‘I can win if Damascus is destroyed’ *Arab News*, January 24, 2013

In similar a vain, it was reported that Hafez al-Assad dispatched his brother Rifaat to Saudi Arabia following the Hama massacre in 1982. King Fahad refused to meet him. Rifaat, through intermediaries, delivered his bold message: “If we ever get threatened again, we will be willing not only to wipe out Hama but also Damascus.”

Quoted in Christoph Reuter ‘A Two-Year Travelogue from Hell’ *Turkey Tribune*, January 5, 2013.

⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ueif2DLx6gw&app=desktop>

not hide his desire for a military solution that would achieve a decisive victory, and believes that only then would the political dialogue be actually possible.”⁸³

The extent of Syria’s meltdown can be summed up with some figures. According to a report by the Syrian Center for Policy Research, after 4 years of bloodshed (2011-2015) 11.5 percent of the population had been killed or injured (470,000 deaths, 1.9 million wounded); 45 percent of the population had been displaced; 13.8 million had lost their source of livelihood and there were more than 4 million refugees abroad. The conflict has “obliterated” Syria’s infrastructure, institutions and national wealth.⁸⁴

The Assad regime embarked on a long, costly and highly unwinnable war that has laid much of Syria to waste. While Assad has remained in power, his strategies of savage repression, sectarian mobilization and externalizing the conflict have ensnared the regime in a web of its own making significantly eroding its legitimacy, institutional structure and territorial control. Assad also placed the fate of his political survival and the outcome of the Syrian civil war into the hands of regional and international actors, i.e., beyond the regime’s immediate control.

5. Findings and Conclusions

This chapter defined the regime’s policy objectives, identified its politico-military strategies and analyzed the policy-strategy match. As illustrated above, the Assad regime lacked national vision and strategic foresight in dealing with an arguably manageable crisis of domestic

⁸³ Ibrahim al-Amin, ‘Exclusive interview: Syrian VP Farouk al-Sharaa Proposes Alternative to War’ *al-Akhbar*, December 17, 2012

⁸⁴ See for example: Ian Black ‘Report on Syria Conflict finds 11.5% of population killed or injured’ *The Guardian*, February 10, 2016

revolt. Specifically, the Syrian leadership failed to implement the appropriate strategies, to commit the necessary resources and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. When strategies backfired, Assad doubled down on the same tried and failed measures instead of cutting losses, considering a policy shift or exploring a new course of action. Failure to balance ends and means has strangled the regime by its umbilical cord and brought about national ruin. In fact, Assad's stubborn refusal to modify his strategies and seek alternative policy options such as a political compromise that would not only save Syria but also maintain the regime's interests have been stated as the main reasons why many government officials abandoned the regime.

Generally speaking, Assad pursued four major strategies to achieve his policy objectives of suppressing the uprising and maintaining his political survival. First, he employed extraordinary brutality and violated redlines that govern state-society relations to terrorize the mobilized populace into submission. The regime failed to select its battles carefully when it chose to fight a very complex enemy with many properties rolled into one: a cause (freedom from tyranny), a brand (the Arab Spring), significant domestic support and regional backing. The zero-sum violent approach served to spread the uprising nationwide, created more domestic and international enemies and squandered opportunities to turn around the crisis.

Second, Assad pursued a harsh enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy that was both unfit for the Syrian insurgency and carried prohibitive political costs in the modern era. The Shermanesque campaign displaced the civilian population, created more anger and resentment, and, enabled rebels to sustain extensive support among the local population.⁸⁵ Assad never

⁸⁵ One journalist explains "Because the regime gives them no option, offers them no future and promises them only death: they are fighting for their lives. The only thing that could change that would be the regime actually caring for its own people, but it seems either unwilling or incapable of pursuing that logic."

'Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts' *International Crisis Groups*, Middle East Report No. 143, June 27, 2013, p. 25

presented his government as an alternative option to insurgency. He not only failed to ground his strategy in reality, but also failed to seek victory in the long term. While the Syrian regime was strong in its military capabilities, engaging in a people's war made the regime akin to the fabled lion that was tormented to death by fleas. Assad failed to tailor his insurgency strategy to the particulars of the Syrian context. Richard Shultz, a scholar of international security studies, remarked, "Anbar demonstrated that counterinsurgency has to be tailored to the fight."⁸⁶

Third, Assad's strategy of abetting jihadism in Syria compounded the frictions of war, radicalized insurgent fighters, prolonged the conflict, attracted a steady stream of religiously motivated foreign fighters and left the Syrian regime more vulnerable and less capable of delivering a decisive blow to the expanding insurgency. In the short term, the Syrian leadership may have succeeded in driving the narrative that his regime is the lesser evil when compared to the so-called Islamic State. However, policy and academic circles across the globe recognize the fact that "Assad perpetrates the local and regional conditions that allow global jihadists to prosper."⁸⁷

Fourth, by internationalizing the Syrian conflict, Assad was not able to move any closer to victory. Instead, it precipitated a ruinous stalemate, injected further complexity into the conflict and accelerated Syria's descent into chaos. Assad became increasingly reliant on his foreign backers for his political survival. In the words of the Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir:

Bashar al-Assad butchered, massacred and killed his people...and his military couldn't save him. So he prevailed upon the Iranians to come and support him, who sent their Quds Forces and Revolutionary Guards, and they in turn couldn't save him. So Iran and Bashar al-Assad mobilized Hezbollah, Shiite militias from Iraq,

⁸⁶ Richard Shultz, *The Marines Take Anbar: The Four-Year Fight against Al Qaeda* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013): p.239

⁸⁷ Christopher Kozak 'An Army in all Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria' *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 26, April, 2015, p. 9

Pakistan, Afghanistan and they in turn couldn't save him. And now we have Russia going into Syria in support of Bashar al-Assad and they will not be able to save him.⁸⁸

Most importantly, Syria's internationalized civil war undercut Assad's politico-military decisional autonomy, left the regime in less control of developments on the ground and made the conflict more intractable and less likely to conclude in a decisive victory. At the time of this writing, Saudi Arabia announced it would deploy troops to Syria, which in turn prompted the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to warn against a world war.⁸⁹ Squaring off among regional rivals on Syrian territory, Assad and the Russians risk transforming a war by proxy into a direct confrontation, with the potential for further escalation. There is no end in sight to the Syrian conflict and Assad's quest to defeat his enemies is illusory at best.

Assad never had a forward-looking approach, nor a realistic vision and sound assessment of the conflict, his capabilities and that of his opponents. In addition, and more crucially, he lacked awareness of the domestic and regional contexts within which the crisis emerged. He placed his immediate interest to remain in power above Syria's vital interests as well as over his regime's survival. The regime remained mired in attempts to win immediate ground battles, stumbling from one policy disaster to another, but has lost Syria and is poised to lose the war. ICG concluded that "[f]ar more than a unified or coherent strategic vision, the regime's behavior reflects a combination of numerous, at times contradictory, impulses and outlooks."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Christiane Amanpour 'Saudi Arabia official: if all else fails, remove Syria's Assad by force' *CNN News*, February 13, 2016.

⁸⁹ Samuel Osbourne 'Saudi Arabia confirms plans to send troops to Syria' *The Independent*, February 11, 2016; 'Syria: Russian PM warns of world war if troops sent in' *Aljazeera News*, February 12, 2016;

⁹⁰ 'The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide, *International Crisis Group*, p. 21

At the time of this writing, the Russian military intervention has enabled the Syrian regime to make major battlefield advances particularly in Aleppo. Assad's refusal to lift the siege on civilian areas and the Russian continued air strikes were largely to blame for the collapse of the peace talks and ceasefires as soon as they were announced by the UN special envoy to Syria, De Mistura.⁹¹ In a recent interview, Assad vowed that he would retake all Syrian territories back and admitted that the fight could "take a long time".⁹² Assad, it seems, remains committed to the same policy-strategy mismatch and determined to march on his chosen well-trodden path to self-ruin.

It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Assad could win this civil war. He can survive, for a while, as long as the conflict remains in a stalemate. External powers (US, Russia, EU, Iran and Saudi Arabia) have divergent views on what a peace deal would look like in Syria. If they could agree, they would most likely base an agreement on the least common denominator that could serve their interests, i.e., a weak peace deal that would not be very different from the current strategic stalemate. Also, no political settlement could guarantee that the parties to the conflict (Assad, the opposition and hundreds of armed groups) would honor its conditions. Moreover, dividing Syria into several states along ethnic or sectarian lines could also provide further impetus for the conflict to continue since the parties involved would most probably fight over borders, natural resources and possibly population transfer.

⁹¹ Hussein Ibish 'Why Syria Peace Talks Collapsed Immediately' *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, February 5, 2016

⁹² Ian Black and Kareem Shaheen 'Syria president Bashar al-Assad vows to retake whole country' *The Guardian*, February 12, 2016

Chapter 15

Conclusions

This research was inspired by a puzzling observation regarding the Arab Spring uprisings; i.e. that authoritarian governments had reacted and responded differently from one another when confronting popular collective action. On closer inspection of this phenomenon, a pattern of authoritarian regimes' domestic conflict behavior emerged. Specifically, moderately authoritarian regimes, such as Tunisia and Egypt, employed comparatively lower levels of repression combined with bargaining and ultimately reached a political compromise with opposition forces. By contrast, highly authoritarian regimes such as Libya and Syria employed high levels of repression with minimum bargaining and plunged their countries into civil war. I have embarked on a 4-year long academic inquiry to investigate and analyze these conflict patterns in an attempt to unpack the underlying causal mechanisms, reduce the mysteries that shroud the decision making process and better understand the dynamics of political contention.

To problematize the process of government crisis response, this research raised a set of empirical questions:

1. What is the relationship between a regime's level of authoritarianism and its capacity to repress with impunity; i.e., afford the political costs of repression?
2. How does the capacity to repress with impunity influence a regime's crisis policy choices at the onset of contentious collective action?
3. Does the authoritative decision unit change during crisis? In addition, how does it affect crisis outcome?
4. Does international pressure influence the political leadership's crisis policy decisions?

5. How do the monopoly of decision-making and the pursuance of short-term goals affect a regime's capacity to prosecute a coherent strategy?

1. Summary of Research Findings

This research adopted a comparative method using Egypt and Syria as case studies within a qualitative approach. For each of the five questions above, I have advanced a corresponding hypothesis and tested it separately in each of the case studies. Below is a summary and synthesis of the research findings.

1.1 Authoritarian Consolidation and the Political Costs of State Repression

The first hypothesis posited that *as the autocratic regime consolidation increases, the political costs of state repression decreases*. Authoritarian consolidation was measured by investigating two aspects of state power: institutional and discursive. Institutionally, Assad's regime had a greater grip over the political, economic, coercive and judicial powers in Syria than Mubarak's regime in Egypt. In addition, the Syrian regime enjoyed higher levels of discursive power (state ideology, restrictions on press freedom and legitimizing narratives) than its Egyptian counterpart. Therefore, during the onset of the uprising in 2011, the Syrian regime was much more consolidated (highly authoritarian) and enjoyed much greater institutionalized impunity for state repression than Mubarak's Egypt (moderately authoritarian) did.

In both case studies, the causal mechanism through which authoritarian consolidation influenced the capacity of the regime to repress with impunity was mediated through (1) permanent governance by emergency powers and (2) a political culture tolerant of state

repression. To be more specific, their dominance over political power enabled both regimes to monopolize the authorities in both the executive and the legislative and to pass and uphold emergency laws that permitted and expanded the use of arbitrary violence. Dominance over coercive power enabled the regimes to maintain the loyalty of the military and security forces, which in turn obeyed the regime's orders at the onset of domestic revolts. Dominance over economic power enabled the regimes to build an expansive patronage system, to create redistributive policies, to maintain clientelistic networks and corruption practices to reward its constituency, and to secure the loyalty of a segment of the population in return for their political quietude, acquiescence and ambivalence when faced with the regime's human rights abuses. Dominance over the judicial power allowed the regimes to immunize the political leadership from the reach of the law, to create a parallel judicial system (Emergency courts) that can repress beyond judicial oversight, and, to grant the security forces a legal basis and unchecked power to suppress dissident activities without fear of prosecution. Dominance over discursive power allowed the regimes to maintain public support and legitimate their actions and practices.

Authoritarian consolidation enabled both regimes, albeit with greater intensity in the Syrian case, to establish the 'rules of the game' within state-society relations. Both regimes were able, to varying degrees, to sanction state violence, routinize their abusive practices, normalize a collective sense of powerlessness, silence and fear vis-à-vis the regime and thus internalize a culture of impunity. However, by doing so, they also provided the political leadership with a sense of invincibility and created an institutional setting that incentivized repression rather than engaging in political compromise at the onset of popular mobilization. This institutionalized impunity and a prevailing sense that the regime could repress violently and get away with it played a major role on the crisis decision calculus as postulated in the second hypothesis.

1.2 Contentious Collective Action and State Policy Response

The second hypothesis postulated that *the lower the costs of state repression, the more likely the government will employ violent repression rather than engage in accommodative strategies*. According to this proposition, a moderately authoritarian regime will respond to domestic revolt with moderate levels of repression and ultimately engage in policy compromise(s) once violence reaches a prohibitive threshold. By contrast, a highly authoritarian regime, given its much lower political costs of repression, will most likely employ higher levels of violence and offer minimal political concessions.

An uprising is not a single event when it comes to the framework of decision making since political leaders make *a series of decisions* during any given crisis. Therefore, to increase the number of observations and testable implications of regime crisis decision making, I have disaggregated Egypt's 18-day revolt into mini crises (n=9) and Syria's (n=12) to analyze mass-contention vs. state policy response. To infer the influence of the low political costs of state repression on the crisis decision calculus, this research examined three factors; namely, (1) the pattern of government policy choices, (2) the motives behind the violence against protesters and, (3) lack of a posteriori accountability.

In Egypt's case, the regime began with a policy of escalating repression and by offering no concessions. However, a few days into the uprising, the government significantly decreased the level of state violence and offered a series, albeit belated, policy compromises which culminated in the ouster of Mubarak from power. In Syria, the regime employed far greater violence combined with nominal concessions and committed atrocities with complete impunity. Assad calculated that suppressing the uprising was a highly plausible prospect and its security forces acted with self-confidence in that they could repress their way out of the crisis.

In both regimes, the *pattern* of the use of force at the onset of the mass revolts coupled with the security forces' *intent* to suppress the protests violently (and the regime's leadership knowledge of such intent) and, most crucially, *lack of accountability a posteriori* strongly suggests that the regime's institutionalized impunity; i.e., the perception that the regime could repress and get away with it, played some role in its calculus of crisis policy choices.

1.3 Shifts in the 'Authoritative Decision Unit' during Crisis

The third hypothesis was that *the authoritative decision unit changes throughout the crisis*. The underlying assumption is that crises of mass uprisings in autocracies present an opportune moment for various domestic actors to compete to tilt the balance of power in their favor while attempting to maximize their political survival in a setting marred by intrigue, uncertainty and violence. Using available sources, this research delves inside the 'black box' of both governments' decision-making circles.

In Egypt, when the police forces collapsed and Mubarak deployed the military, a split in the decision unit occurred when the latter decided not use force against protesters. The military's stance was based on its outstanding rejection of Gamal's economic policies and presidential ambitions. In other words, pre-existing bureaucratic tensions intensified during the uprising and bifurcated the regime's decisional power into the military and the palace, which proved consequential to the crisis' outcome. Mubarak had centralized the decision making power among very few loyalists but his indecision and inaction during the last days of the uprising prompted the military to step in and grab the yoke of power to save the regime.

In Syria, while Assad remained the ultimate decision maker at the beginning of the crisis, his decisional power diminished to some extent as the uprising morphed into a stalemated civil war. This made Assad increasingly reliant on and indebted to his family members, military commanders and international backers for his political survival. There were five major institutional factors that helped maintain the decision unit unchanged: a highly personalist regime that had bestowed vast decisional powers in the hands of Assad and his family, a centralized decision making structure, sectarian identity politics, crisis management organization and, loyal military and security forces. In fact, by preserving the domestic balance of power, no figure from the regime has emerged yet to change course, break the deadlock and lead a political transition.

The non-shift in the decision unit seems to be associated with highly authoritarian regimes which also tend to be personalist regimes that place absolute powers in the hands of one leader around whom a cult of personality is promulgated. This was also the case with Libya's Ghaddafi, who seemed to retain significant decisional power during the uprising and civil war until he was captured and killed by rebels on October 2011.¹

1.4 International Costs and State Response

The fourth hypothesis was that *at the inception of crisis, international costs do not likely influence the government's core crisis policy choices*. The research assessed whether or not international pressure factored in both governments' decision calculus. International costs took many forms including diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, lending support to the opposition forces, naming and shaming regime officials and challenging the regime's narrative in

¹ See for example Peter Kristensen and Salem Dandan 'Colonel Gaddafi: The Political Psychology of a Mad Dog?' in *Personality, Political Leadership and Decision Making: A Global Perspective*, (eds.) Jean Krasno and Sean LaPides, pp. 17-42 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015)

the global media. In both case studies, international pressure succeeded neither in dissuading the governments from repressing protesters nor in compelling them to implement speedy and genuine reforms, but this failure was more pronounced in Syria than in Egypt despite the far greater pressure exercised on the former compared to the latter.

In Egypt, the U.S., and to lesser extent the E.U., exerted the bulk of the international pressure on Mubarak's regime. Ultimately, the Obama Administration's prodding had no significant influence over Mubarak's policy choices. Corroborating the statements made by Egyptian officials as well as Secretaries Panetta, Gates and Clinton, former CIA deputy director Michael Morell indicated in his recent memoir that the "United States kept pushing Mubarak to resolve the crisis through compromise, but the Egyptian president was proving stubbornly resistant."² In fact, according to his correspondence with then Egypt Vice President Omar Suleiman, Gamal and the president's wife had far more influence on Mubarak's policy decisions than Suleiman had.³ Domestic politics played a far more consequential role in the crisis outcome than international diplomacy did.

In Syria's case, regional and world powers recognized early on its fault lines and the potential for the country to unravel at the seam and stir up a hornet's nest should the uprising escalate into an open warfare. For the first six months, regional powers gave Assad the benefit of the doubt on his promises of reforms followed by a hands-on approach to negotiate a political settlement to the crisis. When this failed and international pressure mounted, Assad shrugged off diplomatic moves and economic disincentives and persisted on his policies despite the significant erosion of his economic foundations.

² Michael Morell, *The Great War of Our Time* (New York, Twelve, 2015): p. 182

³ *Ibid*, p. 185

From the perspective of both regimes, but more so for Assad, acquiescing to international pressure and implementing reforms was tantamount to political suicide. For Assad, the international costs levied on Syria did not outweigh the political value of remaining at the helm. Highly authoritarian leaders do not negotiate their exits from power as witnessed in the cases of Gaddafi's Libya, Saddam's Iraq and Siad Barre's Somalia, just to name a few. Therefore, the case studies on Egypt and Syria highlighted the limits of traditional diplomacy in inducing a policy change in the target states. In the words of the late Stephen Bosworth, a former diplomat and Dean of the Fletcher School, "Much of diplomacy is rewarding bad behavior... You're trying to figure out how you can stop the worst of the behavior at the lowest possible price."⁴

1.5 Crisis Management and Strategic Response

The final hypothesis was that *authoritarian governments are unlikely to prosecute a coherent crisis management strategy when it monopolizes decision making at the highest authority levels and pursues victory based on short term goals*. Failure to prioritize national interests, to adequately assess one's capabilities and resources vis-à-vis the opponent, to select obtainable policy goals, to employ the appropriate strategies to achieve these goals and to continually maintain policy-strategy match were all recipes for national disaster. Both regimes lacked national vision and strategic foresight in dealing with their particular crisis of domestic revolt. They pursued parochial interests, failed to balance ends and means, did not consider the long term implications of their policy measures and continued to this day to stumble from one

⁴ Emily Langer 'Stephen W. Bosworth, three-time U.S. Ambassador, dies at 76' *The Washington Post*, January 6, 2016.

policy setback to another that has brought about national ruin for Syria and perpetual instability in Egypt.

In Egypt, when Mubarak was removed from office, the Military Council's pursuit of its parochial interests and refusal to share power ultimately provoked the Muslim Brotherhood to field a presidential candidate. When Morsi's government failed, instead of letting the democratic process play out, the military encouraged protests and then overthrew the first democratically elected president.⁵ Since Sisi's takeover, Egypt has plunged into turmoil: there is a mushrooming ISIS-linked insurgency in Sinai, rising terrorist attacks on government buildings, and, both state violence and suppression of civil liberties have reached unprecedented levels, i.e. levels never seen in the darkest days of Mubarak's reign. Long gone are the days of nationwide Sisi mania and hagiography as Egyptians increasingly struggle under the deteriorating socio-economic conditions and oppressive political climate. Sisi wanted stability at the price of democracy but his policies made matters far worse: police brutality, economic meltdown, political exclusion, the clampdown on civil society and public frustration have pushed Egypt to the cusp of another uprising; that is to say, to a potentially all sweeping revolution. In the words of an Egypt analyst, "Egypt now looks a lot like it did in 2010, just before the 2011 unrest" but with striking differences:

Unlike in 2010...there is no dynamic youth-led movement to protest peacefully: The former leaders are mostly in prison or exile. Instead, what Egypt has in 2015 is an increasingly violent and multifaceted insurgency, composed of and supported by Islamists and others alienated from the limited formal politics showcased in the new parliament, which threatens to take the country into uncharted waters.⁶

⁵ Nathan Brown and Yasser El-Shimy 'Did Sisi Save Egypt' Carnegie, January 25, 2016

⁶ Michele Dunne 'Egypt now Looks a Lot Like It Did in 2010, Just Before 2011 Unrest' *The Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2015

In Syria, Assad perpetrated unspeakable brutality that obliterated all redlines that govern the relationship between a state and its people in pursuit of beating the populace back into submission. To secure his political survival, Assad embarked on a long, costly and highly unwinnable war that laid much of Syria to waste. Instead of ending the conflict, his strategies deepened his quagmire and kept him stranded in a deadly, evolving and expanding stalemate that pummeled much of his manpower and forced him to turn to foreign backers for survival. His parochial objective to stay in power regardless of the consequences was self-defeating. Assad is no longer in control over all of Syria and will remain besieged and embattled if he retreats to an Alawite state. Bente Scheller remarked that “even in the unlikely event of regime withdrawal to a kind of Alawite state, [the Assad regime] would not be in control and in power, but would instead find itself presiding over a mafia state with powerful, uncontrollable actors who are bound to follow only their private interests.”⁷

As most Syrians are quick to point out, protesters and opposition forces were willing to keep Assad in power in return for few political reforms. But Assad’s hubris, his sense of invincibility and the belief that he could repress his way out of the crisis, as his father did in the 1980s, fueled his urge to fight and stay in power through a bloodbath rather than a political compromise. Assad lacked strategic vision and focused on the immediate battles to achieve a swift military victory rather than endear himself to his people and create conditions conducive to deescalating the conflict, regaining the government’s monopoly on the use of force, recovering the regime’s image, fostering national unity, re-establishing the social contract, regaining legitimacy and re-stabilizing the nation state. The Syrian regime has steered itself into a dead-end. There will be no winners in this devastating civil war, only survivors.

⁷ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game: Foreign Policy under the Assads*, p. 38

How do all these research hypotheses synthesize into one coherent story? The research findings have finally provided some answers to the key questions raised in the introductory chapters: Assad's highly authoritarian regime enjoyed very low political costs of state repression (Hypothesis-1), which helped convince the regime leadership of the high probability of its defeating the domestic unrest through state violence and hence influenced its crisis policy decision (Hypothesis-2). It also inhibited a shift in the authoritative decision unit (Hypothesis-3) thereby precluding the possibility of internal splits within the regime's ruling coalition that could have facilitated a crisis exit. International pressure did not engender a policy change in a regime fighting for survival (Hypothesis-4). Because of the concentration of decisional power at the highest levels of authority and the pursuit of short-term victory goals, Assad failed to prosecute a coherent policy-strategy (Hypothesis-5).

In the case of Egypt, Mubarak's moderately authoritarian regime had relatively higher political costs of repression (Hypothesis-1), which motivated the political leadership to employ moderate levels of repression and ultimately resort to political compromise as a solution to the crisis (Hypothesis-2) by precipitating a split within the ruling coalition. Part of the aforementioned split removed a president who had lost legitimacy and threatened to bring the entire political edifice down with him (Hypothesis-3). International pressure failed to affect a shift in the regime's policy (Hypothesis-4). Due to the concentration of decisional power and pursuance of parochial interests, successive Egyptian leaders implemented flawed strategies, instituted the return of the military rule and created unsustainable conditions that have both weakened the state and put the regime on a collision course with an increasingly disillusioned, despondent and angry youth (Hypothesis-5).

2. Contributions to the Literature

This research offers a number of contributions to the body of comparative politics and international relations literature. First, the concept of authoritarian consolidation has been a major lacuna in the literature on authoritarianism. Prominent comparative politics scholars have criticized the notion of consolidation for its “extreme ambiguity”, “inconsistency” and the difficulty to quantify and measure it.⁸ This research has refined, ‘thickened’ and operationalized the concept of consolidation and provided a causal link between consolidation and its influence on the regime’s conflict behavior. Second, this research has opened a door for a new paradigm in the study of comparative autocracy by classifying them according to their level of authoritarianism. That is to say, the degree of a regime’s authoritarianism is found to be a consequential structural factor (in addition to other structural factors in the literature such as rentierism, regime type, civil-military relations and centralizations of political power) in shaping government policy choices at the onset of domestic unrest. Third, this research’s focus stands squarely within the current debates regarding the survival of non-democratic regimes, their democratic potential and state violence. The findings can help improve our understanding of authoritarian resiliency, modes of regime change and transition, the limits of international diplomacy as a foreign policy tool to induce a policy shift in the target state, and, the underlying causes of flawed crisis management strategies.

This research primarily focused on authoritarian consolidation as a structural variable in understanding state conduct during crisis. As such, this work joins the chorus of recently

⁸ See for example Guillermo O’Donnell ‘Illusions about Consolidation’ *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1996): 34-51; Andreas Schedler ‘Measuring Democratic Consolidation’ *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2001): pp.66-92, also Andreas Schedler ‘Concepts of Democratic Consolidation’ *Latin American Studies Association (LASA) 17-19 April 1997 Guadalajara, Mexico Meeting Paper*. Available from: <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LASA97/schedler.pdf>

published studies that explored the role of structure on the political outcomes of the 2011 Arab uprisings.⁹ Institutions in any given polity shape incentives, affect state-society relations and influence the type of policy choices pursued by the leaders to maintain political survival. However, this research has avoided monocausal explanations and demonstrated the role of agency whenever it emerged in the case studies. Therefore, the leaders' worldviews, perceptions of their own capabilities and intentions as well as those of their opponents and, equally important, their idiosyncratic tendencies and traits (insular, short-sighted, risk taker, megalomaniac...etc.) are all also consequential to their behavior during conflict.

In terms of decision-making pathologies, this work highlighted the propensity for authoritarian leaders to succumb to 'groupthink', particularly during crises that threaten their political survival. At the most fundamental level, dictators often surround themselves with a few individuals based on their absolute loyalty rather than on their competency thus creating an echo chamber of sycophants and sustaining a political structure that serves as a 'mirror image' where the leader only sees what he wants to see and hears what he wants to hear. By suppressing dissent and critical thinking, leaders fail to make informed decisions derived from weighing all possible options, from adequately estimating the level of risks of each course of action, from anticipating their long term consequences and, therefore, from maintaining policy-strategy match. Equally important, this research has shed light on some of the factors that induce or prevent a shift in the authoritative decision unit and its consequences on the crisis outcome.

⁹ See for example Raymond Hinnebusch 'Structure over Agency: The Arab Uprising and the Regional Struggle for Power' in *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power*, Spyridon Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud and Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

3. Limitations and Future Research

It is crucial to acknowledge the limits of the findings of this research for two key reasons. First, as is the case with all social science research, complex events such as uprisings and state conflict behavior exist within a complex chain of causation and are enmeshed in a complex web of interactions with often known and perhaps even unknown factors engaged in the process. Change in social systems does not occur in a linear fashion and knowledge of one component (such as levels of repression) does not provide a comprehensive picture of the entire system (authoritarian rule). Furthermore, a researcher's quest to disentangle the complex causal chains, to determine the direction of the causal flow, to gauge the impact of earlier decisions and trace political actions to political outcomes are all the more daunting when studying authoritarian regimes which seem to be, by nature, structurally opaque and which have their decision making process often shrouded in mystery. Therefore, there is still room to penetrate deeper within this topic and within the same case studies examined here to refute, corroborate, enrich and add further and perhaps better insights to the findings of this work.

Second, this dissertation examined only two case studies (n=2). Therefore, the theoretical implications and inferences drawn from this research are historically, geographically and contextually specific to the examined case studies and do not claim to be generalizations applicable to other cases. Since the findings are not universally valid, this opens the possibility to test this research's propositions with other case studies to explore if the theoretical implications are applicable elsewhere. Multiple researches in this area can help reach generalized claims that may be applicable to all authoritarian regimes.

APPENDIX A: Egypt Repression-Concession Matrix

No	Crisis Event	Concession	Repression
1	January 25, 26	Nil	▪ 7 killed
2	January 27, 28	Nil	▪ 579 killed
3	January 29, 30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mubarak dismissed the cabinet (replacing the unpopular Minister of Interior) ▪ Appointment of VP ▪ A number of senior NDP officials stepped down (such as Ahmed Ezz) 	▪ 146 killed
4	January 31, February 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mubarak pledged not to stand for reelection ▪ Government pledged to begin negotiating with the opposition constitutional reforms 	▪ 21 killed
5	February 2, 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gamal would not run for president (ending the 'succession project') ▪ Vice President began national dialogue ▪ Travel ban and asset freeze placed on unpopular NDP officials ▪ Partial restoration of access to internet/ phone coverage 	▪ 21 killed
6	February 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Other NDP officials resigned from party, including Gamal ▪ Former interior minister and top aides were placed under house arrest 	▪ 4 killed
7	February 6, 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Constitutional committee were set up ▪ Vice president met with opposition, including Muslim Brotherhood ▪ Government released Wael Ghonim ▪ 15% salary raise was approved 	▪ 4 killed
8	February 8, 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Government released hundreds of political prisoners (including Muslim Brotherhood) ▪ Vice president announced constitutional and legislative reforms (including the amendment of six article and the annulment of the unpopular article 179) 	▪ 8 killed
9	February 10, 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mubarak resigns ▪ SCAF pledged to sack the cabinet ▪ SCAF pledged to dissolve the parliament 	▪ 13 killed

Concession	Value
Offering core revolutionary demand	3 points
Offering major revolutionary demand	2 points
Offering minor concessions	1

Policy Concession Measurement Matrix

Crisis	Concessions	Values
Jan. 25-26	NIL	0
Jan. 27-28	NIL	0
Jan. 29-30	Mubarak dismisses government = 3 Appointment of Vice President = 2 Senior NDP officials step down = 2	7
Jan 31 – Feb. 1	Mubarak not to stand for re-election = 3 Government pledges to negotiate with the opposition = 2	5
Feb. 2-3	Gamal would not run for president = 3 VP began national dialogue = 2 Travel ban & asset freeze on unpopular NDP officials = 3 Partial restoration of communication = 1	9
Feb. 4-5	Other NDP officials resign, such as Gamal = 3 Former interior minister and top aides placed under house arrest = 3	6
Feb 6-7	Constitutional committee were set up = 2 VP met with opposition, including Muslim Brotherhood = 2 Released Wael Ghonim = 1 15% salary raise was approved = 2	7
Feb 8-9	Released hundreds of political prisoners (including Muslim Brotherhood) = 3 VP announced constitutional & legislative reforms (including amendment of six article & annulment of the unpopular article 179) = 3	6
Feb. 10-11	Mubarak resigns = 3 SCAF pledged to sack the cabinet = 3 SCAF pledged to dissolve parliament = 3	9

Crisis Event	Concession	Repression
January 25, 26	0	7
January 27, 28	0	579
January 29, 30	7	146
January 31, February 1	5	21
February 2, 3	9	21
February 4, 5	6	4
February 6, 7	7	4
February 8, 9	6	8
February 10, 11	9	13

Appendix B: Syria Repression-Concession Matrix

No	Crisis Event	Concession	Repression
1	March 15 – 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formation of a committee to study reforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 63 killed
2	March 25 – 31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Release of political prisoners ▪ Government resignation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 45 killed
3	April 1 – 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fired Deraa governor ▪ Granted Kurds citizenship ▪ Repealed ban on <i>niqab</i> ▪ Rehired teachers ▪ Closed casino 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 26 killed
4	April 8 – 14	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 17 killed
5	April 15 – 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lift the state of emergency ▪ Abolish the Supreme State Security Courts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 59 killed
6	April 22 – 28	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 253 killed
7	April 29–May 5	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 161 killed
8	May 6 – 12	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 82 killed
9	May 13 – 19	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 93 killed
10	May 20 – 26	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 111 killed
11	May 27–June 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pardon political prisoners ▪ Initiate national dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 101 killed
12	June 3 – 9	NIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 189 killed

Concession	Value
Offering core revolutionary demand	3 points
Offering major revolutionary demand	2 points
Offering minor concessions	1

Policy Concession Measurement Matrix

Crisis	Concessions	Values
March 15-24	Formation of a committee to study reforms= 1	1
March 25 - 31	Release of political prisoners = 3 Government resignation = 1	4
April 01-07	Fired Deraa governor = 2 Granted Kurds citizenship = 3 Repealed ban on <i>niqab</i> = 3 Rehired teachers = 3 Allowed formation of Islamist party = 1 Closed casino = 1	13
April 08-14	NIL	0
April 15-21	Lift the state of emergency = 3 Abolish the Supreme State Security Court =3	6
April 22-28	NIL	0
April 29-May 05	NIL	0
May 6-12	NIL	0
May 13-19	NIL	0
May 20-26	NIL	0
May 27-June 02	Pardon political prisoners = 3 Initiate national dialogue = 3	6
June 03-09	NIL	0

Crisis Event	Concession	Repression
March 15-24	1 = 3	63 = 5.25
March 25-31	5 = 15.15	45 = 3.75
April 01-07	15 = 45.45	26 = 2.17
April 08-14	0	17 = 1.4
April 15-21	6 = 18.18	59 = 4.9
April 22-28	0	253 = 21
April 29-May 05	0	161 = 13.4
May 06-12	0	82 = 6.8
May 13-19	0	93 = 7.75
May 20-26	0	111 = 9.25
May 27-June 02	6 = 18.18	101 = 8.4
June 03-09	0	189 = 15.75
Total	33	1200

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